DOWN THESE INNER STREETS

19 CONFESSIONS ON FEAR, EGO, POWER, AND HOW TO GET BETTER

JOSE FRANCO

A Note from the Back Pages

My wink to Piri Thomas is personal. As a business major at Binghamton University, a kid from New York City surrounded by friends studying sociology and the liberal arts who would jokingly call me the “token” or the “sellout,” I once had the privilege of meeting Piri himself. I have written elsewhere about those Binghamton years in *Bridges Through Shadows*, but what stayed with me was something larger than any degree, label, neighborhood, or intellectual tribe: nobody owns the streets through which another person has to find himself. Piri wrote *Down These Mean Streets* from streets that were unmistakably his; my “inner streets” are not an attempt to borrow them, imitate his voice, or manufacture an equivalence between our experiences. The wink is one of gratitude—from one New York kid who eventually learned to interrogate himself to a writer who demonstrated that the contradictions of a life could be put honestly on the page without first cleaning them up for public consumption. Everything I have written and made freely available through Stoop Juice has grown from that same impulse: I write first because writing forces me to confront what I think I know, what I conveniently avoid, and what I may not be seeing. This book is the deepest I have gone into that private excavation. It was written first for Jose Franco—not as an expert instructing anyone how to live, but as an autodidact leaving himself evidence of his own unfinished thinking. If something here creates useful friction for somebody else, wonderful. If nobody reads another word, the writing has already served its first reader. That is also why, like everything else I offer through Stoop Juice, there is no paywall and no price of admission. Take what is useful, question what isn't, disagree wherever your experience demands it, and leave the rest behind. The only thing I would never want these pages to become is an answer key. They are simply an invitation—the same one I keep extending to myself—to walk a little farther down these inner streets and keep asking: **What am I not seeing?**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book to myself.

That matters.

I am not writing as a philosopher, psychologist, historian, theologian, or academic authority. I am an autodidact who has spent much of his life reading, coaching, arguing, working, loving, worrying, making mistakes, changing his mind, and trying to understand why I sometimes know better and still fail to do better.

The thinkers who appear throughout these pages—Nietzsche, Frankl, Popper, William James, Camus, Wittgenstein, and others—are not here to decorate my opinions or lend credentials I do not possess. I have used their ideas the way I have used baseball, family, business, the Bronx streets of my childhood, and the Brooklyn fields of my adulthood: as mirrors, provocations, and sometimes irritants that force me to ask better questions of myself.

I may misunderstand some of them.

I may make connections a formally trained scholar would challenge.

Good.

Challenge them.

This book does not require my interpretations to become yours.

In fact, if *How To Get Better* accomplishes anything, I hope it makes agreement with me less important than disagreement with yourself when your own explanations become too comfortable.

These are not nineteen commandments.

They are nineteen confessions.

That distinction is the reason this book exists.

A commandment points outward.

A confession turns the finger around.

I have standing to examine one human being with unusual access: Jose Franco.

I know some of his motives.

Some.

I know some of his fears.

Some.

I know the stories he tells other people and, more dangerously, some of the stories he tells himself.

I know how easily his good intentions can become justification.

How quickly intensity can become control.

How intelligence can become defense.

How discipline can become cruelty.

How skepticism can become cynicism.

How humility can become another way for ego to admire itself.

I also know that after recognizing all of that, I will probably do several of these things again.

This book is not evidence that I have mastered them.

It is evidence that I have noticed.

That is a much smaller claim.

And perhaps a more useful one.

I have spent decades coaching baseball players and telling them that what they do in the quiet unseen moments will eventually reveal itself when the game begins.

The more I age, the more I realize the same standard applies to me.

The books I read do not determine my character.

The things I write about self-awareness do not determine it either.

Neither does a podcast, a philosophy, a political position, a business decision, or a beautifully constructed explanation of why I behaved the way I did.

The test comes later.

When someone irritates me.

When I become afraid.

When somebody I love chooses differently than I would.

When I feel ignored.

When someone criticizes me.

When I know I can win the argument.

When nobody is watching.

That is the game.

These pages are mostly notes from practice.

I have also been influenced by writers who understood that a life does not have to be cleaned up before it can be examined.

Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* has stayed with me for that reason.

I am not attempting to reproduce Thomas's voice, streets, suffering, or experience. Those belong to him.

These are mine.

The Bronx I remember.

Brooklyn.

Baseball fields.

Family.

Work.

Money.

Fear.

Pride.

Aging.

Love.

The contradictions of trying to become a man while slowly realizing that becoming one never really ends.

The streets themselves have changed.

Some are still made of concrete.

Others now exist on screens.

Algorithms sort us into tribes.

Phones turn humiliation into public record.

Political identities become emotional homes.

Attention becomes currency.

Every person can carry a megaphone in his pocket.

But underneath the technology, many of the old questions remain.

Who am I when I am afraid?

What do I become when I have power?

What happens when belonging requires me not to think?

Can I admit that somebody I dislike is right?

Can I love without controlling?

Can I confront my flaws without learning to hate myself?

Can I know what human beings are capable of and still refuse the refuge of cynicism?

I do not have final answers.

That is another reason I chose confessions.

I am suspicious of final answers.

Especially mine.

If something in these pages sounds certain, I hope the reader understands that the certainty is provisional.

It represents where I stand while writing this in 2026.

I reserve the right to learn something tomorrow that embarrasses today's Jose.

I hope I do.

A book should document a mind at work.

It should not become a prison the author is required to inhabit forever.

So if I read this ten years from now and disagree with something I wrote, I will not regard that automatically as hypocrisy.

I may regard it as evidence that I kept moving.

And if I agree with every sentence exactly as written, perhaps I should become concerned.

I also do not want anyone reading these pages to hand my confessions to another person as a diagnosis.

Chapter Eleven may remind you of your brother.

Chapter Fourteen may sound exactly like your father.

Chapter Twelve may describe someone you work with.

Fine.

Maybe.

But before sending them the chapter, read it again with your own name in it.

That is the agreement I am trying to make with myself.

The title is *How To Get Better.*

Not *How To Get Them Better.*

I cannot promise that self-confrontation produces happiness.

Sometimes awareness makes life less comfortable.

You notice motives you preferred unnamed.

You lose the luxury of certain excuses.

You begin seeing yourself inside behaviors you once criticized only in other people.

You may become less certain while everyone around you appears increasingly sure.

That can feel lonely.

But I have come to believe there is freedom in that discomfort.

Not because uncertainty is inherently virtuous.

Not because doubt should replace conviction.

Because the willingness to examine what I believe gives me a chance—only a chance—to stop protecting something merely because it belongs to me.

That includes this book.

You may disagree with me.

You may think I overcomplicate something simple.

You may think I simplify something complicated.

You may find a blind spot so obvious that you wonder how I missed it.

Good.

I probably did.

The question running underneath these nineteen confessions is not:

Am I right?

It is:

What am I not seeing?

I wrote this book because I need to keep asking that question.

Anyone else who ventures into these pages is welcome to ask it with me.

But I wrote it first to Jose.

He needs the reminder.

ONE: LANGUAGE IS A CRACKED MIRROR

Confession #1: It Distorts the Very Reality It Tries to Describe

I have spent a good portion of my life trying to explain things.

That may be the first thing you should distrust about me.

I explain baseball.

I explain parenting.

I explain politics.

I explain economics.

I explain fear.

I explain why somebody misunderstood somebody else.

I explain why I misunderstood somebody else.

And when I am feeling particularly ambitious, I explain myself to myself.

That last one might be the biggest con of all.

Because somewhere along the way, after thousands of conversations and hundreds of thousands of words, I stumbled into an uncomfortable possibility:

Maybe language isn't the bridge I thought it was.

Maybe it's a cracked mirror.

Useful.

Necessary.

Sometimes beautiful.

But cracked.

You look into it expecting reality and receive an arrangement of fragments.

One piece shows your eye.

Another your mouth.

Another the scar you forgot you had.

And because all the pieces belong to you, you convince yourself that what you're seeing is the whole person.

It isn't.

That's what words do.

Including these.

Especially these.

I grew up believing that the person who could explain himself best probably understood the most.

That belief served me well.

It also screwed me up.

I was a kid from the Bronx who eventually learned that words could get you into rooms your circumstances might not.

There were different languages everywhere.

Not English and Spanish.

Those were the obvious ones.

There was the language you used with your mother.

The language you used with the boys.

The language you used with teachers.

The language you used when somebody challenged you.

The language you used when you were scared but couldn't afford to look scared.

There was school language.

Street language.

Baseball language.

White-collar language.

Poor people's language.

People-with-money language.

There was the language of authority and the language people used when authority wasn't around.

A boy learned quickly that the same sentence could mean two completely different things depending on who said it, where he stood, what he looked like, and whether anybody thought he could back it up.

Nobody handed me a textbook explaining this.

Life did.

That's probably why I became an autodidact.

Although even that word makes me laugh a little.

Autodidact.

That's a ten-dollar word for somebody who figured out that waiting around for somebody else to teach him everything was probably a bad strategy.

I read.

I listened.

I watched.

I argued.

I changed my mind.

I changed it back.

I made connections between things that weren't supposed to belong together.

Baseball and Nietzsche.

Parenting and Popper.

Fear and William James.

Coaching and existentialism.

Economics and the conversations happening outside a bodega.

Power and the way a twelve-year-old reacts when an adult embarrasses him in front of his teammates.

Somewhere in all that reading, I developed a dangerous skill.

I became pretty good at explaining what I thought.

And being good at explaining what you think can easily fool you into believing what you think is true.

Those are not the same thing.

That distinction is where this book begins.

There is an intersection somewhere between the Bronx streets of my childhood and the Brooklyn baseball fields of my adulthood.

I don't know the exact address.

But I visit it constantly.

A kid makes an error.

I see the play immediately.

I've been around baseball for decades.

The ball was hit to the shortstop's right.

He should have moved his feet earlier.

His first step was late.

His glove angle was wrong.

His shoulders were too high.

He rushed the throw because he didn't anticipate the hop.

I can diagnose the entire play before the ball finishes rolling toward the dugout.

And sometimes I'm right.

That's the dangerous part.

Because being right about the mechanics doesn't mean I understand the kid.

Maybe he's afraid of making another error.

Maybe his father yelled at him in the car.

Maybe he's thinking about the last thing I told him.

Maybe the last thing I told him caused the hesitation I'm now correcting.

Maybe he's twelve years old and I'm asking his nervous system to process something my fifty-plus-year-old brain has rehearsed ten thousand times.

Maybe he doesn't care as much as I want him to care.

Maybe he cares so much he can't move.

Maybe he's tired.

Maybe he's embarrassed.

Maybe he's thinking about a girl.

Maybe he's thinking about lunch.

Maybe he doesn't know what the hell he's thinking about.

And then I arrive with language.

"Move your feet."

"Trust yourself."

"Be aggressive."

"Anticipate."

"Stay present."

Wonderful words.

Maybe even correct words.

But correct words delivered into an incorrectly understood reality can become incorrect instruction.

That scares me.

It should.

Because I love coaching.

And love does not inoculate me against doing damage.

Good intentions aren't Kevlar.

One afternoon, imagine I'm standing near a dugout after practice.

A kid has made the same mistake three times.

I feel something rising in me.

Not anger exactly.

Something more respectable.

Frustration.

That's what adults call anger when we want to maintain our self-image.

I start explaining.

The explanation is technically excellent.

Maybe brilliant.

I break down the geometry of the play. I explain timing. I explain preparation. I explain how the feet create the throw. I explain why waiting for the baseball puts the fielder at the mercy of the baseball.

The kid nods.

I keep going.

He nods again.

That nod is gasoline.

I interpret it as comprehension.

So I give him more.

More detail.

More nuance.

More wisdom.

More me.

Finally I ask:

"You understand?"

"Yeah, Coach."

Beautiful.

Transaction complete.

Except I have no idea what that "yeah" means.

It might mean:

I understand.

It might mean:

I think I understand.

It might mean:

I don't understand, but I'm embarrassed.

It might mean:

I understand the words but have no idea how to make my body do it.

Or it might simply mean:

Will you please stop talking so I can go home?

Same word.

Five realities.

That's the crack in the mirror.

Adults do this to one another constantly.

We just have better vocabularies for hiding it.

A Democrat says *justice*.

A Republican says *freedom*.

A businessman says *efficiency*.

A teacher says *equity*.

A parent says *discipline*.

A coach says *accountability*.

A husband says *respect*.

A wife says *communication*.

Everyone nods as though the nouns have settled the matter.

They haven't.

They've barely begun it.

Ask ten people what *freedom* means when freedom costs somebody else something.

Ask ten people what *fairness* means when their child is sitting on the bench.

Ask ten people what *accountability* means when the person being held accountable is them.

Watch the definitions start moving.

That's when language becomes interesting.

Not when we're defining other people's responsibilities.

When we're defining our own.

I have learned to become suspicious whenever my vocabulary becomes especially impressive.

Not because intelligence is bad.

Not because complicated subjects can always be reduced to bumper stickers.

Sometimes reality is complicated because reality is complicated.

But sophistication can become camouflage.

I know because I've worn it.

I can construct a beautiful intellectual explanation for behavior that, stripped of decoration, might amount to:

I was jealous.

I was scared.

I wanted to win.

I wanted people to think I was smart.

I wanted control.

I felt ignored.

I was wrong.

Those sentences are remarkably inexpensive.

No philosopher required.

No footnotes.

No podcast.

No three-hour conversation.

No epistemology.

Just:

I was wrong.

Three words.

Try saying them when your ego has retained counsel.

Suddenly language gets complicated.

That's one of the reasons I distrust people who are certain.

Including me when I'm one of them.

Certainty has a sound.

I've heard it on street corners.

I've heard it in classrooms.

I've heard it in boardrooms.

I've heard it in dugouts.

I've heard it on television.

I've heard it inside my own skull.

Certainty tends to announce itself before evidence arrives.

It says:

Obviously.

Everybody knows.

Those people always.

Those people never.

The problem is simple.

Whenever I hear those phrases, something inside me has learned to reach for the emergency brake.

Not because the speaker is necessarily wrong.

Because reality rarely respects our need for clean endings.

I wish it did.

Binary answers are comfortable.

Good guy.

Bad guy.

Smart.

Stupid.

Victim.

Oppressor.

Winner.

Loser.

Strong.

Weak.

Right.

Wrong.

Then life walks into the room and ruins everything.

The good man behaves selfishly.

The selfish man performs an act of extraordinary generosity.

The brilliant person believes something ridiculous.

The ignorant person notices something all the experts missed.

The victim hurts somebody.

The person who hurt somebody was once a victim.

Now what?

We can either enlarge our thinking or shrink reality until it fits our language.

Human beings are remarkably talented at the second option.

I know.

I've done it.

The most dangerous mirror is the one I hold in front of myself.

Because I control the lighting.

That's the confession beneath the confession.

When I tell my own story, I am simultaneously the defendant, prosecutor, defense attorney, witness, court reporter, and judge.

What could possibly go wrong?

Memory helps me.

Memory is a wonderful accomplice.

It preserves certain details and misplaces others.

It remembers what somebody said to me but becomes strangely unavailable when asked about my tone when I answered.

It remembers betrayal in high definition and my contribution to the conflict in standard definition.

It remembers generosity.

It sometimes forgets the expectation attached to it.

It remembers the times I was underestimated.

It occasionally loses the file containing the people I underestimated.

And then language arrives to organize all of it into a story where I make sense.

That's terrifying.

Because human beings need stories.

I need stories.

But stories have protagonists.

And once I become the protagonist, reality starts negotiating with my ego.

So what am I supposed to do?

Stop speaking?

Stop writing?

Of course not.

That would just be another form of certainty.

Language may be a cracked mirror, but without the mirror I can't examine my face at all.

The crack isn't the problem.

Forgetting the crack is.

That distinction matters.

Words aren't useless because they're incomplete.

Maps aren't useless because they aren't territory.

A baseball scorebook isn't useless because it doesn't tell you whether the shortstop's parents are getting divorced.

A bank statement isn't useless because it can't measure whether the person whose net worth increased slept well last night.

Statistics aren't lies because they fail to contain the universe.

The mistake is demanding that a tool become reality.

Language is a tool.

A magnificent one.

But the moment I mistake my description of something for the thing itself, I stop investigating.

And when I stop investigating, I become vulnerable to the most persuasive liar I have ever encountered.

Me.

This book is called *How To Get Better.*

Even that title bothers me.

Better than what?

Better according to whom?

Better at making money?

Better at loving?

Better at baseball?

Better at admitting fear?

Better at hiding fear?

Better at winning arguments?

Better at knowing when an argument isn't worth winning?

The title contains an assumption I can't prove:

that better exists.

I believe it does.

But belief isn't evidence.

So perhaps this entire book should begin with an asterisk.

*How To Get Better**

**according to a flawed man using imperfect language to describe an incomplete understanding of a reality he will never fully comprehend*.

Not a great title for Amazon.

Probably doesn't fit nicely on the cover either.

But it's closer to the truth.

And "closer" may be the best I can promise you.

I am not writing nineteen commandments.

I don't have them.

I am writing nineteen confessions.

That's different.

A commandment points its finger outward.

A confession turns the finger around.

That is the experiment.

Every chapter will attempt to remove another layer of bullshit between me and whatever is underneath.

Sometimes what's underneath may be wisdom.

Sometimes cowardice.

Sometimes love.

Sometimes vanity dressed like love.

Sometimes discipline.

Sometimes the desire to control another human being disguised as discipline.

I expect contradictions.

I hope for them.

Contradiction is evidence that something is still alive.

A corpse is remarkably consistent.

Human beings aren't.

And that brings me back to the cracked mirror.

Imagine a boy standing in front of one.

Bronx.

Decades ago.

He doesn't know where his life is going.

He doesn't know that one day he'll coach baseball or write books or become obsessed with philosophers whose names would have sounded ridiculous to him then.

He doesn't know that he'll spend years trying to understand the world.

He doesn't know that eventually he'll discover something more difficult:

understanding himself.

The mirror is cracked.

He sees pieces.

Puerto Rican.

Bronx kid.

Baseball player.

Student.

Son.

Brother.

Tough.

Scared.

Ambitious.

Insecure.

Proud.

Ashamed.

None of the pieces are lies.

None are the whole truth.

Years pass.

Brooklyn replaces the Bronx.

Coach replaces player.

Father replaces son.

Gray replaces black.

Books accumulate.

Mistakes accumulate faster.

The mirror remains cracked.

Only now the man standing in front of it understands something the boy couldn't.

The objective was never to repair the mirror.

It was to stop pretending it wasn't broken.

Because maybe self-confrontation begins there.

Not with discovering who I really am.

That sounds too final.

Too clean.

Too much like another explanation.

Maybe getting better begins with something smaller.

Looking at one fragment.

Then another.

Then another.

And resisting the temptation to announce:

There.

That's me.

Instead, I can look at the distorted reflection and ask:

What am I not seeing?

And then comes the harder question:

What am I seeing that I desperately wish weren't true?

I don't know whether those questions will make me a better man.

That's another certainty I don't possess.

But I know what happens when I stop asking them.

I've met that version of myself.

He's articulate.

He's confident.

He can explain almost everything.

And he scares the hell out of me.

TWO: MY BEST EXPLANATIONS ARE OFTEN SOPHISTICATED EXCUSES

Confession #2: Intelligence Can Become the Most Convincing Lawyer My Ego Ever Hired

I can explain almost anything.

Give me enough time and I can probably explain why I was late.

Why I lost my temper.

Why I didn't call.

Why I said something I shouldn't have said.

Why I didn't say something I should have said.

Why I stopped doing something I promised myself I would continue doing.

Why I judged somebody.

Why I was impatient.

Why I spent the money.

Why I didn't save the money.

Why I didn't exercise.

Why I ate what I said I wasn't going to eat.

Why I interrupted somebody.

Why I raised my voice.

Why I was harder on a kid than I needed to be.

Why I gave advice nobody asked me for.

Why I was technically right and still managed to be completely wrong.

Give me another ten minutes and I might even explain why the explanation itself demonstrates personal growth.

That's when you should become suspicious.

I certainly have.

Because I have slowly discovered something about myself that isn't particularly flattering:

I am often most articulate precisely when I have the most to hide.

Not from you.

From me.

There is a courtroom inside my head.

It has been operating for decades.

No holidays.

No weekends.

Twenty-four hours a day.

And I have assembled one hell of a legal team.

My ego is the defendant.

My intelligence is the defense attorney.

My memory supplies expert witnesses.

My emotions select the jury.

And somehow, despite an astonishing amount of evidence, the defendant keeps getting acquitted.

I don't even have to lie.

That's the beauty of the arrangement.

I just have to curate the truth.

That's different.

Much more sophisticated.

A lie says:

I didn't do it.

A sophisticated excuse says:

I did it, but you have to understand the larger context.

Now we're cooking.

Because there is always larger context.

I was tired.

I was worried.

I was under pressure.

I had good intentions.

I was trying to help.

You misunderstood me.

That's not what I meant.

You don't know what happened before that.

I reacted because of what somebody else did.

Technically, all of those things might be true.

That's what makes excuses so effective.

The best excuses aren't fabricated.

They're edited.

I've spent enough time around baseball fields to understand this.

A kid strikes out.

He walks back to the dugout.

"Umpire squeezed me."

Kid makes an error.

"Bad hop."

Pitcher walks three hitters.

"Mound sucks."

Fly ball drops.

"I lost it in the sun."

Sometimes the umpire did make a bad call.

Sometimes the ball did take a bad hop.

Sometimes the mound is terrible.

Sometimes the sun really does make a baseball disappear.

That's why coaching this stuff is difficult.

The excuse and the truth can occupy the same sentence.

The question isn't always:

Is what you're saying true?

The better question might be:

What does this truth allow you to avoid confronting?

That question is harder.

For the player.

For the coach.

For me.

A twelve-year-old says:

"The umpire called it a strike."

Maybe he did.

But were there two strikes already?

Yes.

Was the pitch close?

Yes.

Could you have fouled it off?

Probably.

Then we can spend the next ten minutes conducting a forensic investigation into the competence of a middle-aged man volunteering his Saturday afternoon behind home plate.

Or we can ask:

What could you have controlled?

That question interests me.

Not because the kid is responsible for everything that happens to him.

He isn't.

None of us are.

The world contains bad hops.

Bad calls.

Bad luck.

Bad people.

Disease.

Accidents.

Economic collapses.

Betrayal.

Randomness.

Injustice.

Sometimes you prepare perfectly and lose anyway.

Sometimes somebody behaves irresponsibly and wins.

Any philosophy that denies that is selling something.

But there is another danger.

If I become too fascinated with everything outside my control, I eventually construct a life where I am responsible for nothing.

That is an incredibly comfortable prison.

I know because I've built rooms inside it.

Nice rooms.

Bookshelves.

Comfortable chairs.

Philosophy books everywhere.

I can sit there for hours explaining why things happened.

That's the danger of being intellectually curious.

Curiosity can help you escape your assumptions.

It can also help you decorate them.

I can read Nietzsche and explain resentment.

I can read Frankl and talk about meaning.

I can read Popper and discuss falsifiability.

I can read William James and examine experience.

I can talk about existentialism, economics, psychology, power, incentives, culture, childhood, social conditioning and historical context.

All useful.

All interesting.

All potentially true.

And sometimes the most honest explanation is still:

Jose, you were being an asshole.

No bibliography required.

That sentence is difficult for me.

Not because I think I'm incapable of behaving badly.

I know I am.

The difficulty is that I prefer explanations that leave my self-image mostly intact.

Most of us do.

We want accountability with an appeals process.

I want to admit the mistake while quietly preserving the possibility that, under the circumstances, any reasonable person would have done exactly what I did.

That's not confession.

That's plea bargaining.

I have done plenty of it.

There is a strange thing that happens when you've lived long enough.

You accumulate evidence.

Not evidence about the world.

Evidence about yourself.

Patterns.

The same argument wearing different clothes.

The same insecurity appearing in different rooms.

The same impatience attached to different people.

At twenty-five, you can say:

"That's just what happened."

At thirty-five:

"Interesting coincidence."

At forty-five:

"Maybe there's a pattern."

At fifty-five, if the same thing keeps happening, you eventually have to confront an unpleasant possibility:

Maybe I'm the recurring character.

That doesn't mean everything is my fault.

That's another simplistic explanation.

It means I am the only participant who appears in every episode of my life.

That makes me worthy of investigation.

I have been coaching baseball for decades.

That sentence contains both experience and danger.

Experience tells me I have seen things before.

Danger whispers that because I have seen things before, I already know what I'm looking at.

Those are different.

A kid doesn't hustle.

I see laziness.

Maybe.

Or I see what looks like laziness through the lens of how I played baseball.

That's where the investigation begins.

I played with intensity.

I cared visibly.

I liked urgency.

I expressed commitment through movement, emotion, preparation and competitiveness.

So when a kid doesn't display those things the same way, something inside me can translate his behavior:

He doesn't care.

Notice what happened.

Observation became interpretation.

Interpretation became judgment.

Judgment became fact.

All in about three seconds.

Then Coach Jose arrives with an explanation.

"Kids today..."

Dangerous sentence.

Whenever somebody my age begins with "kids today," I think we should be required to place a cash deposit on the table before continuing.

Because every generation eventually develops amnesia about its own stupidity.

Mine included.

Especially mine.

The kid I'm judging might care deeply.

He might simply express it differently.

Or maybe he really doesn't care.

That's possible too.

Nuance doesn't require me to romanticize him.

It requires me to remain curious long enough to find out.

That's harder than judgment.

Judgment is fast.

Curiosity takes time.

Judgment protects my framework.

Curiosity threatens it.

And if I discover that the kid does care, then I might have to confront something much less comfortable than his supposed indifference:

Maybe my coaching isn't reaching him.

Now the explanation turns toward me.

That's when things get interesting.

There is an old trick we play with ourselves.

We turn intention into evidence.

"I was only trying to help."

I've said some version of that more times than I can count.

Maybe I was.

But intention and impact are not twins.

Sometimes they barely know each other.

I can love someone and still suffocate them.

I can want the best for a child and still project my fears onto him.

I can want my daughter to succeed and give advice that has more to do with relieving my anxiety than helping her.

I can want a player to become mentally tough and accidentally teach him that vulnerability disappoints me.

I can demand accountability from someone while refusing to examine the emotional need underneath my demand.

I can call something "discipline" when part of what I really want is obedience.

I can call something "high standards" when part of what I really fear is losing control.

The frightening word in those sentences is not *can*.

It's *I*.

Good intentions deserve consideration.

They do not deserve immunity.

That's one of the most painful things I've learned.

Because I like thinking of myself as well-intentioned.

Most people do.

Nobody wakes up in the morning, looks into the mirror and says:

"Today I'm going to be the villain in somebody else's story."

We construct motives that allow us to remain protagonists.

Even when we're causing damage.

Especially when we're causing damage.

Parents do it.

Coaches do it.

Teachers do it.

Politicians do it.

Religious leaders do it.

Corporations do it.

Countries do it.

History contains mountains of suffering produced by people convinced they were helping.

That doesn't make intention irrelevant.

It makes intention insufficient.

The phrase **I meant well** has probably buried more self-reflection than almost any sentence in the English language.

I meant well.

Okay.

Now what happened?

That second question is where accountability begins.

I can intend to throw a strike.

Ball four is still ball four.

Baseball is beautifully cruel that way.

The scoreboard has very little interest in my intentions.

Neither does the baseball.

I can have perfect mechanics, excellent preparation and tremendous courage.

If the pitch misses the zone, it misses the zone.

That doesn't mean I'm a failure.

It means the pitch was a ball.

Simple.

Specific.

Temporary.

No identity required.

What if I treated character the same way?

Instead of:

I'm a good person, therefore what I did must somehow be understandable.

What if I said:

I believe I'm trying to become a good person, and in that moment I behaved badly.

Those sentences feel completely different.

The first protects identity.

The second investigates behavior.

Behavior can change.

Identity fights for survival.

Maybe that's why self-confrontation becomes harder as we get older.

We've invested heavily in the story.

At twenty, the identity is still under construction.

By fifty, we've installed marble countertops.

Nobody wants to hear that the foundation might be crooked.

I've spent decades becoming Jose Franco.

Whatever that means.

Coach.

Husband.

Father.

Writer.

Autodidact.

Baseball guy.

Critical thinker.

Somebody who values nuance.

Somebody who believes in self-confrontation.

Even those identities can become hiding places.

Especially the last one.

Imagine the irony.

I could become so proud of being self-confrontational that I stop confronting myself.

I could say:

"At least I'm willing to examine my flaws."

Congratulations.

There's another medal for the ego.

I could turn humility into evidence of superiority.

Human beings are talented that way.

Give the ego any philosophy and eventually it will try to put its name on the building.

Even humility.

There is another excuse I know well.

That's just who I am.

What a convenient sentence.

I'm intense.

I'm direct.

I'm impatient.

I'm passionate.

I'm stubborn.

I'm old-school.

I'm competitive.

I'm emotional.

That's just who I am.

Maybe.

But personality is not diplomatic immunity.

If my intensity repeatedly hurts people, calling myself intense doesn't resolve anything.

If my directness becomes cruelty, "I'm just honest" is not a defense.

If my passion requires everybody around me to absorb my anxiety, maybe passion isn't the only thing operating.

If my stubbornness prevents me from learning, perhaps I'm not principled.

Perhaps I'm scared.

Labels describe patterns.

They shouldn't excuse them.

I have another favorite.

I know my limitations.

That sounds wonderfully self-aware.

I've probably written some version of it a hundred times.

And I mean it.

But knowing my limitations is worthless if the knowledge never interrupts the behavior.

Imagine a pitcher saying:

"Coach, I'm completely aware that I keep flying open."

Then he flies open.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Eventually I have to ask:

What exactly is the value of the awareness?

Self-awareness without behavioral consequence can become self-admiration.

Look how deeply I understand myself.

Great.

Now what?

That question follows me everywhere.

Now what?

Maybe that is the dividing line between explanation and excuse.

An explanation helps me understand what happened so I can respond differently.

An excuse helps me understand what happened so I don't have to.

Same past.

Different future.

That's a useful distinction.

Not perfect.

Nothing in this book will be.

But useful.

If I say:

"I raised my voice because I was anxious."

That might be an explanation.

If the sentence leads me to recognize the anxiety earlier next time, regulate myself and speak differently, the explanation has value.

If I say:

"I raised my voice because I was anxious, and you know how I get when I'm anxious."

Now the explanation has applied for a new job.

It's becoming permission.

I think about this with coaching.

Suppose I'm hard on a player.

Later I realize I was projecting my own expectations onto him.

I can explain exactly why.

My childhood.

My baseball experiences.

My personality.

My generation.

My belief that preparation demonstrates respect.

My fear that talent gets wasted.

My desire to help him avoid regrets.

All true.

Now what?

If I return to practice tomorrow and do the same thing, I've learned nothing.

I've merely created a sophisticated documentary about my dysfunction.

That's not growth.

That's commentary.

And I have spent too much of my life confusing commentary with change.

Writers are particularly vulnerable to this.

We write about wisdom.

Then we get irritated because somebody is driving too slowly.

We write about empathy.

Then someone disagrees with us and suddenly empathy needs the afternoon off.

We write about insignificance.

Then we're offended because somebody didn't respond to our text.

We write about controlling the controllable.

Then spend three hours furious about something entirely outside our control.

I know this because I'm describing myself.

I can write a beautiful paragraph about accepting uncertainty at eight o'clock in the morning and become annoyed by uncertainty before lunch.

The paragraph doesn't save me.

Nietzsche doesn't save me.

Frankl doesn't save me.

Popper doesn't save me.

Books don't save me.

They can illuminate.

They can provoke.

They can disturb.

They can give language to something I couldn't previously articulate.

But eventually I have to close the book.

Then somebody pisses me off.

That's the exam.

Life has an annoying habit of administering the test before announcing the curriculum.

No study guide.

No warning.

You're tired.

Someone says something.

Your kid disappoints you.

Your spouse misunderstands you.

A player ignores an instruction.

Somebody challenges your authority.

Money gets tight.

Your body hurts.

Someone you love gets sick.

Somebody dies.

You fail.

You get embarrassed.

Your plans collapse.

And somewhere between stimulus and response, the philosophy you've been bragging about either shows up or it doesn't.

Mine doesn't always show up.

That's another confession.

Sometimes all my reading disappears.

The old machinery takes over.

Fear.

Ego.

Pride.

Control.

Anger.

Defensiveness.

Then, afterward, the intellectual arrives.

Late.

Carrying books.

Ready to explain everything.

I'm trying to fire that guy.

Not the intellectual.

The defense attorney.

I still want curiosity.

I still want context.

I still want nuance.

I still want to understand why people behave the way they do, including me.

But I don't want understanding to become acquittal.

Sometimes understanding should lead directly to conviction.

Not condemnation.

Conviction.

There's a difference.

Condemnation says:

You're terrible.

Conviction says:

You did that.

One attacks identity.

The other establishes responsibility.

Maybe that's the kind of courtroom I need inside my head.

Less punishment.

More evidence.

Less shame.

More accountability.

Less:

What kind of person does this make me?

More:

What am I going to do differently?

I don't want to hate myself into becoming better.

I don't think that works.

At least not for long.

But I also don't want to love myself so unconditionally that I become incapable of admitting when I'm full of shit.

There must be room between self-loathing and self-exoneration.

That's where I want to live.

Probably uncomfortably.

Good.

Comfort has been an unreliable teacher.

So I have started asking myself a question whenever I produce an especially convincing explanation for my own behavior:

If someone I disliked gave me this exact explanation, would I accept it?

That one hurts.

Because suddenly my standards become visible.

If somebody else is late:

Irresponsible.

If I'm late:

Complicated morning.

Somebody else loses his temper:

No self-control.

I lose mine:

You don't understand what led up to it.

Someone else changes his mind:

Hypocrite.

I change mine:

New information.

Someone else wants recognition:

Ego.

I want recognition:

Human nature.

Funny how flexible nuance becomes when I'm the beneficiary.

Maybe self-confrontation requires reversing that instinct.

Not becoming harsher with myself than everyone else.

That can become another ego performance.

But applying roughly the same curiosity and accountability in both directions.

Understanding other people's context without erasing their responsibility.

Understanding my context without erasing mine.

That seems simple.

It isn't.

Simple truths rarely are.

So here's Confession Number Two.

I have explanations.

Lots of them.

Some are thoughtful.

Some are sophisticated.

Some are probably correct.

And some are beautifully constructed escape tunnels.

The problem is that from inside my own mind, they can look exactly the same.

That's why I need friction.

Other people.

Questions.

Contradictions.

Consequences.

Sometimes a twelve-year-old baseball player who looks at me like I'm talking too much.

Sometimes my wife.

Sometimes my daughter.

Sometimes somebody who doesn't like me.

Sometimes the person I immediately want to dismiss.

Especially that person.

Because the criticism that irritates me fastest might contain information I don't want.

Not always.

Some criticism is stupid.

Some is malicious.

Some people really don't know what they're talking about.

Nuance requires admitting that too.

But if my first instinct is always to explain why the critic is wrong, I've learned nothing except how quickly my defense attorney can get to the courthouse.

I'm trying something different.

When the explanation comes—and it always comes—I want to hear it.

Then I want to put it on the table.

Look at it.

Turn it over.

And ask:

Is this helping me understand my behavior?

Or:

Is this helping me avoid changing it?

Sometimes I won't know.

That's okay.

Uncertainty doesn't frighten me as much as it used to.

Certainty does.

Because the man who can explain everything has no reason to investigate anything.

And the man with no reason to investigate himself has no reason to change.

Maybe that's why getting better has so little to do with having better answers.

Maybe it begins with becoming suspicious of the answers that arrive too quickly.

Especially the flattering ones.

Especially the intelligent ones.

Especially mine.

Because the most dangerous bullshit I will ever encounter probably won't sound like bullshit.

It will sound reasonable.

It will contain context.

It will acknowledge complexity.

It might quote a philosopher.

It might even be beautifully written.

And somewhere underneath all those impressive words may be a frightened little sentence hoping nobody notices it:

I don't want to change.

That sentence doesn't need an explanation.

It needs a confrontation.

THREE: WE USE JARGON AND DIALECTICS TO AVOID THE RAW DISCOMFORT OF SIMPLE TRUTHS

Confession #3: Sometimes the Bigger My Words Become, the Smaller My Courage Gets

I love words.

That's becoming a problem.

Not because words are bad.

Words rescued me.

They gave shape to things I felt before I knew how to describe them. They introduced me to people who had been dead for centuries and somehow understood pieces of me better than people standing three feet away.

Words took a kid from the Bronx into rooms he never knew existed.

Nietzsche.

Camus.

Popper.

Proust.

William James.

Frankl.

Wittgenstein.

Schopenhauer.

Pascal.

I read them because I was curious.

I read them because I wanted to understand.

I read them because there was something intoxicating about discovering that a feeling I thought belonged only to me had been wrestled with by another human being long before I was born.

Eventually I learned their terminology.

Epistemology.

Dialectics.

Phenomenology.

Existentialism.

Determinism.

Cognitive dissonance.

Confirmation bias.

Falsifiability.

Will to power.

All useful concepts.

All potentially dangerous.

Because somewhere along the way I discovered that a complicated vocabulary can perform a magic trick.

It can make avoidance look like intelligence.

Sometimes I don't need Nietzsche.

Sometimes I need:

Jose, you're scared.

That's it.

No footnote.

No philosophy.

No podcast.

No fucking dialectic.

You're scared.

And sometimes I would rather spend forty-five minutes discussing the philosophical architecture of fear than spend fifteen seconds admitting that.

I didn't grow up speaking like this.

Nobody on the block said:

"Jose, perhaps your present emotional discomfort represents an existential confrontation with the contingency of being."

They would've looked at you like you had lost your mind.

The language was simpler.

"You scared?"

"No."

Sometimes that was the entire philosophical debate.

The interesting part was that everybody knew the answer might be bullshit.

The boy saying *no* could be terrified.

But there were rules.

You didn't always announce fear.

Fear had consequences.

Sometimes admitting fear made you vulnerable.

Sometimes pretending not to be afraid was how you got yourself hurt.

You learned to read bodies.

Faces.

Silences.

Distances.

Tone.

Who stepped forward.

Who stepped backward.

Who was talking loudly because he wasn't scared.

Who was talking loudly because he was.

That was education too.

No syllabus.

No diploma.

Just consequences.

Years later I would read philosophers discussing fear, angst, power, identity and the construction of the self.

And I loved it.

Still do.

But occasionally I would laugh.

Because some professor could spend twenty pages explaining something the streets communicated with a raised eyebrow.

That doesn't make the professor useless.

And it doesn't make the street wise about everything.

That's exactly the binary bullshit I'm trying to avoid.

Both languages reveal something.

Both conceal something.

The academic can hide ignorance behind complexity.

The street can hide ignorance behind certainty.

I've done both.

There is a temptation when you're self-taught.

You want to prove you belong in the room.

Maybe nobody else notices it.

Maybe you don't even notice it.

But somewhere inside you remembers that you didn't come through the approved entrance.

You don't have the credential.

You didn't study philosophy formally.

Nobody handed you permission to connect Nietzsche to youth baseball or Popper to parenting or existentialism to a twelve-year-old struggling with a bigger baseball field.

So you compensate.

You read more.

You explain more.

You qualify everything.

You make sure people know you've thought about it.

Sometimes that's intellectual discipline.

Sometimes it's insecurity wearing glasses.

I've worn those glasses.

The irony of being an autodidact is that freedom can become another prison.

I wasn't trained to think inside one discipline.

That's an advantage.

I can wander.

Economics over here.

Psychology over there.

Baseball.

Politics.

History.

Philosophy.

Parenting.

Business.

I can grab something from one room and carry it into another.

Sometimes something interesting happens.

But intellectual wandering carries its own danger.

If nobody is grading the paper, you can become your own favorite professor.

You can build arguments nobody challenges.

You can mistake connections for evidence.

You can quote intelligent people until your own assumptions begin sounding intelligent by association.

You can become impressed with yourself.

I have.

That's another confession hiding inside this one.

I've noticed something about myself.

When I understand something deeply, I can usually explain it simply.

When I only half understand it, my vocabulary gets ambitious.

That's not always true.

Some ideas genuinely require specialized language.

Try explaining quantum mechanics with refrigerator magnets.

Precision sometimes requires terminology.

But there is another kind of complexity.

Protective complexity.

The complexity I manufacture because simplicity would expose me.

Imagine I hurt someone.

They tell me:

"What you said embarrassed me."

There are two roads available.

Road one:

"I'm sorry."

Road two:

"Well, I think we have to distinguish between my intention and your interpretation because interpersonal communication is inherently subjective, and what one person perceives as embarrassment may actually be a product of preexisting sensitivities..."

Look at that beautiful highway.

Four lanes.

Fresh pavement.

No traffic.

Straight out of accountability.

I could drive forever.

The intellectual content might even be defensible.

Communication *is* subjective.

Intentions *do* matter.

People *do* interpret events through prior experiences.

All true.

And completely irrelevant to the first responsibility.

I embarrassed you.

Start there.

We can hold the symposium later.

I think human beings use complexity the way octopuses use ink.

Something threatens us.

Pfffft.

Cloud the water.

Disappear.

Jargon is excellent ink.

So are politics.

So is ideology.

So is therapy language.

So is religious language.

So is business language.

So is coaching language.

Every tribe eventually invents vocabulary that allows its members to sound like they're explaining reality while mostly signaling membership to one another.

Baseball might be one of the funniest examples.

"He's got good extension."

"Creates separation."

"Stays through the zone."

"Needs better sequencing."

"His arm action isn't synced."

"Needs to engage the lower half."

Wonderful.

What does the kid actually need to do?

Sometimes:

Throw the fucking ball.

I've watched adults make baseball incredibly complicated for children.

I've probably been one of them.

We study launch angles.

Exit velocity.

Spin rate.

Biomechanics.

Hip-shoulder separation.

Kinetic chains.

Arm slots.

Bat paths.

Attack angles.

All useful.

Potentially.

But there's a twelve-year-old standing in the batter's box with fourteen instructions running through his head.

Hands back.

Stay inside.

Load.

Stride.

Rotate.

Don't drift.

Stay behind it.

See it deep.

Use your legs.

Head down.

Finish high.

Drive the middle.

Be aggressive.

Relax.

Relax?

After all that?

We've turned hitting a baseball into an IRS audit and now we're telling the kid to relax.

Then the pitcher throws the ball.

The kid freezes.

"Why didn't you swing?"

Maybe because eight adults are living inside his skull.

Sometimes expertise creates blindness.

We know so much about the mechanics that we forget the organism.

The kid.

The person.

The nervous system trying to coordinate movement while experiencing fear, expectation, embarrassment and twelve-year-old hormones.

We see an athlete.

He feels a life.

Those aren't always the same thing.

One of the most dangerous words in coaching is **development.**

Everybody loves development.

Parents want development.

Coaches promise development.

Programs advertise development.

Trainers sell development.

Development.

Development.

Development.

Ask what it means.

Now things get interesting.

More velocity?

Better statistics?

More playing time?

Better emotional regulation?

More independence?

More confidence?

More discipline?

Greater self-awareness?

Getting recruited?

Making varsity?

Playing college baseball?

Enjoying baseball enough to still love it at eighteen?

What exactly are we developing?

A player?

A scholarship candidate?

A winning team?

A customer?

A child?

A human being?

Those goals can overlap.

They can also collide.

The word **development** allows us to pretend they are identical.

They're not.

That's what jargon does when we're not careful.

It compresses unresolved contradictions into agreeable nouns.

Politics does the same thing.

Freedom.

Justice.

Security.

Equality.

Patriotism.

Progress.

Tradition.

Say any of those words loudly enough and people start cheering before anyone defines the terms.

That's convenient.

Definitions create problems.

Definitions require tradeoffs.

Tradeoffs ruin speeches.

Everybody supports freedom until somebody else's freedom creates a cost.

Everybody supports equality until equality conflicts with an advantage they possess.

Everybody supports accountability until the investigation reaches their own doorstep.

Everybody supports sacrifice when someone else is carrying the box.

Words become tribal currency.

We exchange them without checking whether they're backed by anything.

I'm fascinated by this because I do it too.

I like the word **nuance.**

I use it constantly.

Nuance.

Nuanced thinking.

Nuanced dialogue.

Nuanced perspective.

Sounds wonderful.

But nuance can become jargon too.

If I'm not careful, *nuance* becomes the word I use when I don't want to commit to anything.

"Well, it's nuanced."

Okay.

And?

Sometimes there are two legitimate competing truths.

Sometimes there are twenty.

Sometimes evidence is incomplete.

Sometimes certainty would be dishonest.

But sometimes I'm simply afraid to say what I think.

Those aren't the same thing.

Nuance should complicate certainty.

It shouldn't eliminate courage.

I have another favorite phrase:

critical thinking.

Who opposes critical thinking?

Nobody.

It's like announcing your support for oxygen.

But I've noticed something.

Most people believe critical thinking is what they're doing when they explain why the other side is wrong.

I'm guilty too.

It's incredibly easy to critically examine somebody else's assumptions.

Try doing it to your own.

Different sport.

I can identify confirmation bias in somebody whose politics I dislike from across the street.

My own confirmation bias requires forensic equipment.

Funny how that works.

Maybe critical thinking doesn't begin when I ask:

What are they missing?

Maybe it begins when I ask:

What would have to be true for me to be wrong?

That sentence costs more.

Karl Popper interests me for precisely that reason.

Not because I need everyone reading this book to become a philosopher of science.

I don't.

The useful idea is brutally simple:

Don't spend your entire life collecting evidence that proves you right.

Look for the thing that could prove you wrong.

That's uncomfortable.

Which is probably why we don't naturally do it.

I don't wake up excited to discover that one of my favorite beliefs is bullshit.

Neither do you.

At least I assume you don't.

Maybe I'm wrong.

There.

Practice.

There is a strange relationship between intelligence and self-deception.

We assume smarter people are harder to fool.

I'm not convinced.

Maybe intelligence just gives us better tools for fooling ourselves.

A person with limited vocabulary can construct a simple excuse.

A highly educated person can build a cathedral.

Columns.

Stained glass.

Latin inscriptions.

Peer-reviewed citations.

And buried underneath the altar is the same little fear.

I don't want to be wrong.

I've done this in arguments.

Someone makes a point.

I immediately notice the weakness.

Wrong statistic.

Bad analogy.

Logical inconsistency.

Historical error.

Beautiful.

I attack.

I win.

At least I think I win.

Then later, sometimes much later, I realize something irritating.

The person was wrong about the explanation.

But right about me.

That's a terrible feeling.

Because now my victory becomes evidence against me.

I defeated the argument and protected the flaw.

Congratulations.

Maybe this is why simple truths can feel so violent.

They leave fewer exits.

"I'm jealous."

No committee required.

"I'm lonely."

Hard to footnote.

"I wanted attention."

Not much room for dialectics.

"I'm afraid my daughter doesn't need me the way she used to."

Now we're getting somewhere.

"I'm afraid these kids won't remember anything I tried to teach them."

Interesting.

"I'm afraid that after decades of coaching baseball, some twelve-year-old might understand something about himself that I still don't understand about me."

Now the vocabulary starts getting nervous.

Quick.

Find Nietzsche.

But I don't want philosophy to become anesthesia.

I want it to be a knife.

Not a weapon pointed outward.

A scalpel.

Something precise enough to cut through my own bullshit.

Nietzsche's **will to power** interests me not because it gives me permission to dominate people.

Quite the opposite.

The frightening question is whether my desire to improve myself quietly becomes a desire to control everybody around me.

Frankl's search for meaning interests me not because I want a slogan about overcoming adversity.

It makes me ask whether I can find meaning without demanding that suffering justify itself.

Popper interests me because he reminds me that my favorite theory should remain vulnerable.

Wittgenstein interests me because language itself can construct the boundaries of what I'm capable of seeing.

But if I finish reading any of them and merely feel smarter, I've probably wasted my time.

The question is:

What changed?

Not in my vocabulary.

In me.

I think about my father.

I think about my mother.

I think about people who lived enormous portions of their lives without discussing epistemology.

They navigated grief.

Money.

Marriage.

Work.

Children.

Fear.

Pride.

Illness.

Aging.

Death.

The human curriculum.

They didn't need academic vocabulary to suffer.

Nobody does.

Pain is multilingual.

Fear doesn't require literacy.

Reflection does.

That distinction matters to me.

Because the goal isn't to make suffering sound intelligent.

The goal is to become intelligent enough to listen to what suffering might be exposing.

Sometimes it exposes nothing.

That's another uncomfortable truth.

Not every tragedy contains a lesson.

Sometimes terrible things happen.

The universe does not owe me symbolism.

But even when suffering contains no message, my response to it can reveal me.

The streets taught me something philosophy later complicated.

The streets said:

Pay attention.

Philosophy asked:

To what?

The streets said:

Don't be stupid.

Philosophy asked:

How would you know?

The streets said:

Don't let anybody play you.

Philosophy asked:

What if the person playing you is you?

That last question stuck.

Maybe that's the bridge I'm trying to build.

Not between intellectuals and everybody else.

That sounds arrogant.

As though one group owns thought and the other owns authenticity.

Bullshit.

I'm trying to build a bridge inside myself.

Between the kid who learned by watching and the man who learned by reading.

Between instinct and analysis.

Between Bronx and Brooklyn.

Between baseball fields and bookshelves.

Between the language I use to understand life and the life that keeps refusing to fit inside my language.

I don't want to choose one.

I need both.

But I don't want either becoming a hiding place.

There is a test I increasingly like.

Take whatever I believe and remove the sophisticated vocabulary.

What's left?

Instead of:

"My behavioral response was influenced by subconscious expectations generated by an attachment to a preferred outcome."

Try:

I didn't get what I wanted and got pissed off.

Instead of:

"My coaching intensity occasionally reflects an unconscious projection of my personal developmental framework onto athletes whose lived experiences differ substantially from mine."

Try:

I expect kids to care the way I cared.

Instead of:

"My desire to offer guidance sometimes conflicts with the autonomy required for genuine self-discovery."

Try:

Sometimes I need to shut up.

Those versions sting more.

That's probably useful.

I don't want to eliminate sophisticated language.

That would be stupid.

Language can create distinctions that simple words cannot.

Complexity is real.

Nuance is real.

History matters.

Culture matters.

Psychology matters.

Economics matters.

Context matters.

The problem isn't complexity.

The problem is using complexity to escape simplicity.

Because after all the theories have been considered, sometimes the remaining truth is embarrassingly small.

You lied.

You were scared.

You wanted control.

You were jealous.

You were selfish.

You wanted to be admired.

You didn't listen.

You knew better.

You did it anyway.

Now what?

There's that question again.

Now what?

Maybe that is the phrase I should write on the wall.

Not Nietzsche.

Not Camus.

Not Popper.

Not Frankl.

Not some impressive quotation.

Just:

NOW WHAT?

You understand why you did it.

Now what?

You understand your childhood.

Now what?

You understand your trauma.

Now what?

You understand your privilege.

Now what?

You understand your disadvantage.

Now what?

You understand capitalism.

Now what?

You understand oppression.

Now what?

You understand the psychological mechanism.

Now what?

You understand yourself.

Wonderful.

Now what?

At some point knowledge has to encounter behavior.

Otherwise I'm just collecting intellectual furniture.

There is one more uncomfortable possibility.

Maybe I'm writing this book because writing a book about self-confrontation is easier than confronting myself.

I have to allow that possibility.

Maybe *How To Get Better* becomes another sophisticated excuse.

Look at Jose.

Nineteen confessions.

How vulnerable.

How reflective.

How courageous.

Maybe.

Or maybe I discover a clever way to confess publicly so I can avoid changing privately.

Public vulnerability can become performance too.

I don't know.

That's the problem.

I can't stand outside myself and objectively inspect my motives.

Neither can you.

We are simultaneously the experiment and the scientist.

That should make us humble.

It rarely does.

So I'm leaving myself a condition.

This book doesn't count.

Writing it doesn't count.

Publishing it doesn't count.

Someone praising it doesn't count.

Someone telling me it changed their life definitely doesn't count.

The only thing that counts is what happens when nobody is watching.

The quiet unseen moments.

When I want to interrupt and don't.

When I want to explain and listen instead.

When I feel fear and don't disguise it as anger.

When someone challenges me and I become curious before defensive.

When a player makes the same mistake for the fourth time and I remember that his mistake is not happening *to me*.

When my daughter makes a decision differently than I would and I remember that her life isn't an extension of mine.

When my wife tells me something I don't want to hear and I resist assembling the legal team from Chapter Two.

That's the book.

Everything else is marketing.

Maybe getting better is much less intellectual than I want it to be.

That possibility annoys me.

I've done all this reading.

Surely there should be some advantage.

Maybe there is.

Books can point.

Ideas can illuminate.

Language can reveal patterns.

Philosophy can widen the field.

But eventually I have to walk onto the field.

Nobody gets a hit because he understands the philosophical implications of hitting.

The pitcher throws.

You swing.

Sometimes you miss.

Sometimes you don't.

Then another pitch comes.

When I was younger, I thought intelligence meant having increasingly sophisticated answers.

Now I'm not so sure.

Maybe intelligence is partly the ability to recognize when sophistication has become unnecessary.

Maybe wisdom is knowing when to put the books down.

Maybe courage is being able to remove every adjective, every theory, every historical justification and every psychological explanation until I reach the sentence I have been avoiding.

Then saying it.

Out loud if necessary.

Quietly if that's harder.

So here is mine:

I use words because I love them.

I use words because they help me think.

I use words because they connect me to people across centuries.

I use words because sometimes they bring me closer to truth.

And sometimes—

I use words because I am afraid of the truth.

That's Confession Number Three.

No dialectic necessary.

And if I ever start explaining why it's more complicated than that, do me a favor.

Ask me the question I'm trying to learn to ask myself:

Jose, what are you avoiding?

FOUR: NOBODY CHEERED FOR THE MIDDLE

Confession #4: Nuance Isolates You from Both Tribes

Nobody chants:

"IT DEPENDS! IT DEPENDS! IT DEPENDS!"

I've never seen the T-shirt.

Nobody paints **MAYBE** across his chest and shows up at the rally.

No politician walks to the podium, pounds his fist and announces:

"My fellow Americans, after carefully examining the evidence, I have concluded that the people who disagree with us may have several legitimate points."

Campaign over.

Nobody wants to storm the barricades carrying a sign that says:

THE OTHER SIDE ISN'T ENTIRELY WRONG.

There is no adrenaline in that.

No enemy.

No hero.

No clean victory.

Just tension.

Questions.

Tradeoffs.

Uncertainty.

And the possibility that after spending three hours examining something honestly, you might end up less certain than when you started.

Welcome to nuance.

The loneliest seat in the stadium.

I've spent much of my life around teams.

Baseball teams.

Families.

Neighborhoods.

Businesses.

Political conversations.

Schools.

Communities.

Every team has boundaries.

Some are visible.

Uniforms make it easy.

Burgundy over here.

Blue over there.

Your dugout.

Their dugout.

Your parents cheering.

Their parents complaining about the umpire.

At least baseball is honest about tribalism.

The uniforms tell you who you're supposed to root for.

Life is more subtle.

The uniforms become vocabulary.

Beliefs.

Neighborhoods.

Education.

Money.

Race.

Class.

Religion.

Politics.

Even the television station playing in the background.

We learn to recognize one another.

He's one of us.

She's one of them.

And once those categories settle into place, something interesting happens.

The same behavior starts meaning different things depending on the uniform.

Our guy is passionate.

Their guy is unhinged.

Our politician compromises.

Theirs betrays his principles.

Our protest is righteous.

Theirs is dangerous.

Our wealthy person is successful.

Theirs is greedy.

Our poor person needs help.

Theirs lacks responsibility.

Or reverse every sentence.

Different tribe.

Same machinery.

I've watched it.

I've participated in it.

I still do.

That's the confession.

I wish I could tell you that recognizing tribalism freed me from tribalism.

It didn't.

Understanding gravity doesn't make you float.

I still want belonging.

I still like people agreeing with me.

I still feel something pleasant when somebody says:

"Exactly."

That word is intellectual sugar.

Exactly.

You understand me.

I understand you.

We're together.

And maybe they're right.

But I've learned to become slightly suspicious of how good agreement feels.

Because truth doesn't owe me companionship.

Growing up, belonging wasn't an abstraction.

It mattered.

You learned who was from where.

Who knew whom.

Who could walk where.

Who had your back.

Who didn't.

A neighborhood teaches tribal intelligence early.

Sometimes that intelligence keeps you safe.

Sometimes it keeps you trapped.

The same instinct that says **these are my people** can produce extraordinary loyalty.

It can also produce extraordinary blindness.

That's one of the problems with human virtues.

Turn the dial too far and many of them become vices.

Loyalty can become complicity.

Confidence can become arrogance.

Discipline can become cruelty.

Patience can become passivity.

Open-mindedness can become cowardice.

Love can become control.

Even courage can become stupidity.

The virtue doesn't tell you when you've crossed the line.

That's your job.

Good luck.

I learned another version of belonging through baseball.

Baseball gives you a dugout.

I love the dugout.

There is something primitive and beautiful about it.

You're with these guys.

For the next seven innings, nine innings, whatever the game requires, their success becomes connected to yours.

A teammate strikes out.

You don't boo him.

At least you shouldn't.

A pitcher walks somebody.

You make the play behind him.

A kid makes an error.

The ball comes to him again.

That's the deal.

Trust.

I have told players for years that a team needs three things to give itself the best chance to win:

Pitchers throw strikes.

Play defense.

Trust.

The third one is the strangest.

You can't measure it cleanly.

But you know when it's gone.

Trust requires belonging.

But belonging has a shadow.

The dugout can start demanding intellectual obedience.

Agree with the coach.

Agree with the team.

Don't question.

Don't disrupt.

Don't be difficult.

I have to confront that as a coach because I like discipline.

I like preparation.

I like players responding quickly.

I like a team moving together.

All reasonable.

And lurking somewhere inside those preferences is a tiny dictator.

He doesn't call himself a dictator.

Of course not.

He calls himself **Coach**.

That's much more respectable.

He says:

"I just need everybody on the same page."

Maybe.

But who wrote the page?

Me?

And what happens when a twelve-year-old thinks the page is wrong?

Do I actually want him to tell me?

I say I do.

That's easy.

The real test is whether I still want his honesty when it inconveniences me.

Nuance sounds admirable until it interferes with the tribe.

Then it starts looking suspicious.

Ask one difficult question inside a group that agrees with itself and watch the temperature change.

Not necessarily because your question is intelligent.

It might be stupid.

But groups develop immune systems.

They recognize threats.

A question can become a threat because it interrupts certainty.

And certainty is one of the substances groups use to bind themselves together.

We know.

Two powerful words.

We know what happened.

We know who caused it.

We know what kind of people they are.

We know what needs to be done.

Certainty creates momentum.

Nuance asks everybody to stop the car and check the map.

Nobody likes that guy.

Especially when the car is moving fast.

I've been that guy.

I've also hated that guy.

Another confession.

When I'm uncertain, I appreciate the person introducing complexity.

When I'm certain, he becomes annoying.

Funny.

Same behavior.

Different relationship to my ego.

Political conversations make this painfully obvious.

Say something critical about the political left and somebody assumes you're on the right.

Say something critical about the political right and somebody assumes you're on the left.

Criticize capitalism.

Communist.

Criticize socialism.

Greedy capitalist.

Question policing.

Anti-cop.

Question a particular reform.

Racist.

Support immigration.

Open borders.

Question immigration policy.

Xenophobe.

Support Israel's right to exist.

One box.

Criticize the Israeli government's actions.

Another box.

Express concern for Palestinian civilians.

Another box.

Condemn terrorism.

Another box.

The sorting machine operates faster than thought.

Everyone wants to know:

Whose side are you on?

Sometimes my answer is:

On this specific question?

People hate that answer.

Because they're not always asking what I think.

They're asking where I belong.

I understand the impulse.

Belonging makes the world manageable.

There are billions of human beings.

Countless motives.

Histories.

Cultures.

Contradictions.

We need categories.

Without categories we couldn't function.

I see a stove and categorize it as hot.

Useful.

I see a stranger approaching quickly in a dark place and make assumptions.

Potentially useful.

The brain predicts.

It has to.

But a tool designed for rapid survival can become dangerous when applied lazily to human complexity.

The category becomes the person.

The label becomes the evidence.

And eventually we stop encountering human beings.

We encounter representatives.

Republican.

Democrat.

Liberal.

Conservative.

Immigrant.

Cop.

Teacher.

Rich.

Poor.

Black.

White.

Latino.

Man.

Woman.

Boomer.

Gen Z.

Whatever.

Once the label arrives, curiosity can leave early.

I've spent my life inside labels too.

Bronx kid.

Puerto Rican.

Baseball player.

Coach.

Business owner.

Writer.

Father.

Husband.

Autodidact.

Each tells you something.

None tells you enough.

That's the cracked mirror again.

And maybe the mistake isn't labeling.

Maybe it's forgetting that the label is shorthand.

A starting point.

Not a verdict.

There is a price for refusing the verdict.

Sometimes nobody claims you.

I've felt that.

If I criticize something one group believes, people inside that group can experience criticism as betrayal.

If I then criticize the opposing group, they don't necessarily welcome me either.

You become politically homeless.

Intellectually inconvenient.

Too skeptical for the believers.

Too believing for the skeptics.

Too compassionate for the hard-liners.

Too demanding for the compassionate.

Too capitalist for some.

Too suspicious of capitalism for others.

Too tough for one room.

Too soft for another.

You start wondering:

Where the hell am I supposed to stand?

Maybe that's the wrong question.

Maybe I don't need somewhere permanent to stand.

Maybe I need somewhere from which I can see.

But I shouldn't romanticize this.

That's another trap.

There is ego available in being the independent thinker too.

Plenty of it.

"I'm not like those tribal people."

Careful, Jose.

Congratulations.

You've just formed the Tribe of People Who Think They're Above Tribes.

Membership: enormous.

Uniform: smugness.

I know that temptation.

The independent thinker can become addicted to independence.

Contrarianism starts masquerading as courage.

Everyone says yes?

I say no.

Everyone says no?

I say yes.

That isn't thinking.

That's dependence wearing the opposite jersey.

If my position is determined by opposing yours, you're still controlling me.

Nuance does not mean automatically choosing the middle.

This matters.

If one person says two plus two equals four and another says it equals twelve, nuance isn't declaring the answer eight.

The middle can be bullshit too.

There are facts.

There are moral boundaries.

There are moments when evidence overwhelmingly points in one direction.

There are acts that deserve condemnation.

There are lies.

There is cruelty.

There are atrocities.

There are people acting in bad faith.

There are situations where refusing to take a position isn't sophistication.

It's cowardice.

The middle isn't sacred.

The process is.

That's the distinction I'm trying to learn.

Nuance isn't where I end up.

It's how honestly I'm willing to travel.

Sometimes honest examination takes me left.

Sometimes right.

Sometimes somewhere nobody has named.

Sometimes back where I started.

Sometimes it forces me to say:

"I was wrong."

Sometimes:

"I still believe what I believed before, but for different reasons."

And occasionally:

"I don't know."

Those three words have become increasingly valuable to me.

I don't know.

Not as surrender.

As accuracy.

There was a time when I thought knowledge accumulated like bricks.

Read enough books.

Have enough experiences.

Make enough mistakes.

Eventually you build a fortress of wisdom.

I'm less convinced now.

Age has done something unexpected.

The more I learn, the more doors appear.

Behind every answer is another hallway.

I used to imagine knowledgeable people standing on mountaintops.

Now I imagine them walking around with better flashlights.

The darkness is still enormous.

That doesn't make knowledge meaningless.

It makes humility rational.

The problem is humility doesn't rally the troops.

Imagine a political debate.

Moderator asks:

"What's your solution?"

Candidate answers:

"Parts of my proposal might work. Parts might produce unintended consequences. Some of the people opposing me have legitimate concerns, and if new evidence contradicts my assumptions, I intend to change the policy."

That person might be thoughtful.

That person might also be unemployed by Wednesday.

We reward confidence.

Then complain about arrogance.

We reward simple promises.

Then complain when reality becomes complicated.

We demand certainty from leaders confronting systems nobody completely understands.

Then act shocked when certainty turns out to have been theater.

Maybe we're not just victims of bad leadership.

Maybe leadership sometimes gives us exactly the emotional product we're purchasing.

Certainty.

I've sold certainty too.

Coaches do it constantly.

"Do this."

"Don't do that."

"This is the right way."

Sometimes players need that.

A twelve-year-old doesn't need a philosophical seminar while a runner is stealing second.

There are moments for direct instruction.

That's another tradeoff.

But the danger comes when situational authority becomes intellectual infallibility.

I know baseball.

Therefore I know this player.

I know this player.

Therefore I know what motivates him.

I know what motivates him.

Therefore I know what's best for him.

Look how quickly expertise becomes omniscience.

One assumption at a time.

I think about the boys I've coached.

I've told them:

You are your own best coach.

I mean that.

But if I mean it, eventually they have to disagree with me.

Otherwise I'm not developing autonomy.

I'm developing compliance.

That's uncomfortable.

Because maybe they disagree badly.

Maybe they're wrong.

Maybe they ignore good advice.

Maybe they make a mistake I could have prevented.

What then?

Do I intervene?

Of course.

Sometimes.

How much?

When?

For how long?

Welcome back to nuance.

Nobody cheering.

There is a developmental moment every parent eventually faces.

You spend years teaching a child how to make decisions.

Then one day the child makes decisions.

Terrible system.

We should have thought this through.

They develop opinions.

Preferences.

Boundaries.

They reject advice.

Sometimes advice based on mistakes you already made.

You want to grab them:

I ALREADY PAID THE TUITION FOR THIS LESSON. USE MY RECEIPT.

Doesn't work that way.

Knowledge isn't always transferable.

Sometimes the lesson has to enter through the skin.

That's painful when you love someone.

It also exposes something.

Is my goal really their development?

Or is my goal an outcome that makes me comfortable?

Those can look identical until the person chooses differently than I would.

Then the distinction becomes visible.

This is where nuance stops being intellectual and becomes emotional.

It's easy to hold two opposing ideas in an essay.

Try holding them when someone you love is involved.

I want to protect you.

I need to let you risk failure.

I believe I'm right.

I accept that I might be wrong.

I want you to listen to me.

I want you to learn to think for yourself.

I want my players to trust me.

I want them capable of questioning me.

I want discipline.

I want freedom.

I want standards.

I want empathy.

I want confidence.

I want humility.

I want intensity.

I want perspective.

I want to matter.

I want to embrace my insignificance.

No wonder we're tired.

The binary mind looks at those tensions and says:

Choose.

The nuanced mind says:

Hold them.

Not forever.

Decisions eventually have to be made.

But hold the contradiction long enough that you don't amputate half of reality just because carrying both sides hurts.

That discomfort might be the work.

I've started thinking about a pendulum.

Human beings love swinging it.

We discover one extreme caused harm.

So we race toward the opposite extreme.

Authoritarian parenting hurt children.

Never discipline.

Excessive permissiveness hurt children.

More authority.

Standardized testing became obsessive.

Eliminate standards.

Standards disappear.

Bring back testing.

Police abuse authority.

Defund police.

Crime increases.

More police.

Markets fail.

Regulate.

Regulation creates unintended consequences.

Deregulate.

Deregulation creates unintended consequences.

Regulate again.

Back and forth.

History occasionally looks like humanity trying to repair the damage caused by its previous repair.

Maybe the pendulum is unavoidable.

Maybe correction requires overcorrection sometimes.

I don't know.

But I know I have a pendulum inside me.

Too hard.

Notice harm.

Become softer.

Notice standards slipping.

Become harder.

Talk too much.

Try silence.

Say too little.

Talk again.

Control.

Release.

Fear.

Confidence.

Ego.

Humility.

I don't arrive.

I adjust.

Maybe that's getting better.

Not finding the perfect position.

Developing sensitivity to when I've swung too far.

That's less satisfying than mastery.

I want mastery.

I like the idea of solving myself.

Imagine.

Jose Franco 2.0.

Bugs fixed.

Ego patched.

Fear optimized.

Nuance installed.

Automatic updates enabled.

Unfortunately, human beings don't appear to work like software.

The old code remains.

You just become more familiar with where it crashes.

Nobody cheered for the middle.

But maybe I don't need applause.

That's difficult for me to write because I enjoy recognition.

There.

Another simple truth.

I like when people appreciate what I write.

I like when players remember something I taught them.

I like when someone says I made them think.

I like being useful.

And somewhere mixed into that usefulness is ego.

Probably always will be.

So when I say I don't need applause, that's aspirational.

Let's not turn Chapter Four into another sophisticated excuse.

I hear the applause.

I enjoy it.

I'm trying not to need it to determine what I believe.

Different claim.

More honest.

The same applies to criticism.

I want to say criticism doesn't bother me.

Bullshit.

Sometimes it does.

Sometimes a lot.

Especially criticism that touches something I'm already insecure about.

But maybe courage isn't becoming immune to criticism.

Maybe it's refusing to outsource my thinking to either praise or condemnation.

Listen.

Investigate.

Take what's useful.

Discard what's dishonest.

Reconsider what hurts.

Move.

That sounds healthier than pretending I'm bulletproof.

The older I get, the less interested I am in winning membership.

Not uninterested.

Less interested.

I don't want my politics telling me what I must think before I examine the question.

I don't want my ethnicity determining which conclusions I'm permitted to reach.

I don't want my generation becoming an excuse to dismiss younger people.

I don't want being a coach preventing a twelve-year-old from teaching me something.

I don't want being a father confusing love with ownership.

I don't want being an autodidact turning skepticism toward institutions into skepticism toward expertise.

I don't want being skeptical of expertise turning into worship of ignorance.

I don't want nuance becoming another identity I defend.

That's a lot of things I don't want.

I'll probably fail at several before dinner.

But there is one freedom in standing between tribes.

You can hear both crowds.

Sometimes they're saying completely different things.

Sometimes, if you listen carefully, they're describing the same fear using different vocabulary.

Fear of losing control.

Fear of being invisible.

Fear of economic insecurity.

Fear of cultural displacement.

Fear of humiliation.

Fear that the future belongs to somebody else.

Fear that nobody cares.

Fear that somebody is taking something from us.

The policies differ.

The histories differ.

The power relationships matter.

The consequences aren't equivalent.

But beneath a surprising amount of human certainty, fear is doing manual labor.

I've learned to look for it.

Especially in myself.

Maybe that's why tribes are comforting.

They convert fear into righteousness.

Fear says:

I'm vulnerable.

The tribe says:

We're right.

Much better feeling.

Vulnerability asks questions.

Righteousness provides answers.

Vulnerability exposes me.

Righteousness exposes you.

I understand the appeal.

But I'm trying to become suspicious whenever belonging requires me to stop asking questions.

That's too expensive.

If membership requires blindness, I would rather stand outside.

I say that knowing standing outside has its own loneliness.

There is no heroic soundtrack.

No crowd chanting my name.

Sometimes you're just alone with an uncomfortable thought.

Maybe your side is wrong about this.

Maybe the people you've criticized have a point.

Maybe somebody you dislike said something true.

Maybe somebody you admire behaved terribly.

Maybe your enemy isn't entirely evil.

Maybe your hero isn't entirely good.

Maybe you aren't either.

Especially you.

Especially me.

I don't know whether humanity can live comfortably with that.

Maybe we're not built for permanent ambiguity.

Maybe tribes are part of the species.

Maybe the desire to belong will always outrun the desire to understand.

I can't solve that.

Confession Number Four isn't a solution to tribalism.

It's smaller.

More personal.

I know how good belonging feels.

I know how painful isolation can feel.

And I know there will be moments when intellectual honesty asks me to disappoint people whose approval I value.

That scares me.

Because despite all my talk about insignificance, I still want to be liked.

I still want a dugout.

I still want people who say:

He's with us.

Maybe getting better means answering:

Sometimes.

Sometimes I'm with you.

Sometimes I think you're wrong.

Sometimes you're going to think I'm wrong.

Sometimes I'll discover you were right.

Sometimes neither of us will know.

And if our relationship cannot survive that uncertainty, perhaps what we had wasn't trust.

Perhaps it was compliance.

So nobody cheered for the middle.

Fine.

I'm beginning to understand why.

There's nothing to chant.

No guarantee.

No permanent home.

No intellectual uniform.

Just an obligation to keep looking.

To resist mistaking discomfort for evidence.

To resist mistaking agreement for truth.

To resist mistaking disagreement for betrayal.

To resist the intoxicating certainty of the crowd.

And when the crowd on my side starts cheering something I know isn't true, to ask myself whether I have enough courage to remain quiet.

Or harder:

To speak.

Not because the other tribe will welcome me.

They probably won't.

Not because standing alone makes me right.

It doesn't.

But because there are moments when belonging and honesty demand different things.

And I am slowly learning that the loneliness of uncertainty may be cheaper than the comfort of pretending.

That's Confession Number Four.

I don't belong comfortably in the middle.

I don't even know where the middle is.

I'm just trying to remain uncomfortable long enough to see what everybody—including me—is tempted to stop looking at.

Nobody cheers for that.

Maybe that's precisely why I need to practice it.

FIVE: NON-BINARY THINKING PROMISES NO QUICK VICTORIES

Confession #5: Permanent Tension Is the Price of Refusing Easy Answers

I used to think uncertainty was a temporary inconvenience.

A room you passed through.

A hallway between ignorance and knowledge.

You entered confused.

You asked questions.

You gathered facts.

You thought harder.

Eventually, if you were disciplined enough, intelligent enough, patient enough, you arrived somewhere solid.

An answer.

A conclusion.

A position.

Done.

I no longer believe that.

Or, more accurately, I no longer trust how much I want to believe it.

Because life has taught me something deeply inconvenient:

Some tensions are not problems to solve. They are conditions to live inside.

That changes everything.

Especially if you're addicted to resolution.

I am.

Baseball teaches you to love resolution.

Three strikes.

You're out.

Four balls.

Take your base.

Catch the ball before it hits the ground.

Out.

Ball beats runner.

Out.

Runner beats throw.

Safe.

Beautiful.

Binary.

Immediate.

The umpire points.

Decision made.

Move on.

Real life is rarely that generous.

There is no umpire behind the plate when you're deciding how hard to push your child.

No official ruling when you're wondering whether loyalty has become enabling.

No scoreboard when you're deciding whether forgiveness means reconciliation.

No instant replay when you're trying to determine whether your silence was patience or cowardice.

No final score proving whether your political belief helped more people than it hurt.

No box score for whether you were a good father.

No earned-run average for character.

That's probably why we import sports thinking into places where it doesn't belong.

Winner.

Loser.

Right.

Wrong.

We want the call.

Safe or out.

But life keeps saying:

Keep playing.

Non-binary thinking sounds intellectual.

It isn't.

Not really.

It's emotional labor.

Anyone can say:

"There are two sides."

The difficult part is when one side threatens something you love.

Then nuance gets expensive.

I can easily recognize competing truths in somebody else's family.

Try doing it in mine.

I can tell another parent:

"You have to give your child room to make mistakes."

Wonderful advice.

Then my own daughter makes a decision that worries me and suddenly autonomy needs several amendments.

I can tell another coach:

"Don't project your experience onto the player."

Then one of my players doesn't prepare the way I would have prepared, and my internal prosecutor starts filing charges.

I can say:

"People are complicated."

Then somebody hurts me.

Amazing how quickly complexity disappears.

Pain is binary.

At least at first.

You hurt me.

Therefore you're wrong.

That's the nervous system talking.

Maybe sometimes it's exactly correct.

But injury creates urgency.

Urgency wants certainty.

Certainty wants a culprit.

That's how fast the machinery operates.

And sometimes we need it.

If someone is threatening you, that is not the time for a graduate seminar on competing perspectives.

Protect yourself.

Leave.

Fight.

Call for help.

Act.

Non-binary thinking does not require paralysis.

That's another misunderstanding.

It doesn't mean every situation deserves infinite consideration.

It means I should remain aware that action and certainty are not the same thing.

I can act decisively while admitting incomplete knowledge.

That's harder than it sounds.

I think about pitching.

A pitcher can't stand on the mound indefinitely examining every possibility.

Runner on first.

One out.

Two-one count.

He needs a pitch.

Now.

Fastball away.

Go.

Maybe it works.

Maybe it doesn't.

The decision must be made under uncertainty.

That's life.

The mature goal isn't eliminating uncertainty.

It's becoming less terrified of making responsible decisions inside it.

That may be one of the biggest corrections I've had to make in myself.

I used to associate conviction with certainty.

Now I think conviction can exist without certainty.

Maybe that's courage.

There is a difference between saying:

I know this is right.

And:

Given what I understand now, this is the decision I'm willing to take responsibility for.

The second sentence is less impressive.

Much heavier.

Because now I can't hide behind destiny.

Or ideology.

Or the crowd.

Or history.

Or a philosopher.

I chose.

Maybe wisely.

Maybe badly.

But I chose.

That is one of the strange burdens of freedom.

Everybody likes freedom as an idea.

Freedom sounds fantastic.

Flags.

Speeches.

Songs.

Choice.

Independence.

But genuine freedom carries responsibility attached to the ankle.

If no one forced me, then I have to own what I did.

That complicates freedom considerably.

Maybe that's why people sometimes prefer certainty supplied by others.

Tell me the rules.

Tell me what's right.

Tell me what good people believe.

Tell me what my side believes.

Tell me what successful parents do.

Tell me what winning coaches do.

Tell me what a real man does.

Tell me what the market will do.

Tell me how much is enough.

Tell me what comes next.

Tell me so I don't have to live with the fact that nobody completely knows.

I understand that hunger.

I've spent years trying to reduce uncertainty.

Money.

Baseball.

Family.

Health.

Politics.

The future.

I run scenarios.

I ask questions.

I calculate.

I read.

I think.

Planning has value.

Absolutely.

But planning can become a ritual designed to convince myself that uncertainty has been defeated.

It hasn't.

I can build ten scenarios.

The eleventh is waiting outside.

That's not pessimism.

That's reality.

This is especially true with money.

People want the number.

How much do I need?

When can I retire?

What's the safest investment?

Should I pay off debt or invest?

Buy or rent?

Sell or hold?

Give me the answer.

I understand that too.

I've asked those questions.

But there is always a hidden variable.

Markets.

Health.

Inflation.

Taxes.

Family needs.

Longevity.

Opportunity.

Fear.

Desire.

The meaning of enough.

A spreadsheet can model probabilities.

It cannot decide what kind of uncertainty you're willing to live with.

That's personal.

And changing.

The same thing happens in parenting.

How hard should I push?

There is no universal answer.

Push too little and you may fail to develop discipline.

Push too much and you may turn achievement into fear.

Praise effort.

But don't create entitlement.

Protect them.

But let them struggle.

Offer advice.

But don't smother autonomy.

Be present.

But don't make your presence a demand.

Where is the correct line?

It moves.

Child to child.

Age to age.

Day to day.

Maybe that's why parenting advice sells so well.

People are desperate for a stationary target.

Coaching isn't different.

When do I correct?

When do I let the player figure it out?

When do I remove the pitcher?

When do I show confidence by leaving him in?

When does confidence become negligence?

When does patience become passivity?

When does discipline become humiliation?

When does encouragement become dishonesty?

When do I tell the kid:

You can do this.

And when do I tell him:

You're not ready yet.

Both can be acts of love.

Both can be acts of ego.

That's the problem.

I don't get to escape the tension by labeling myself.

"I'm a demanding coach."

"I'm a supportive coach."

"I'm old-school."

"I'm progressive."

Those are costumes.

Real coaching happens in decisions.

Situational.

Specific.

Messy.

Sometimes contradictory.

The kid who needs a push today may need space tomorrow.

If I need my identity to remain consistent, I may become inconsistent with what the player actually needs.

That's another paradox.

Sometimes consistency of principle requires inconsistency of method.

Try putting that on a coaching clinic T-shirt.

Maybe this is what bothers people about non-binary thinking.

It provides fewer scripts.

Scripts feel safe.

You know the role.

Strict father.

Gentle father.

Traditional coach.

Modern coach.

Capitalist.

Socialist.

Liberal.

Conservative.

Strong man.

Sensitive man.

Pick one.

Then perform it.

Life gets easier.

Until reality demands something the script doesn't contain.

I have scripts too.

One of mine is intensity.

Intensity has served me well.

I respect preparation.

Effort.

Responsibility.

Showing up.

Doing things when nobody is watching.

The quiet unseen moments.

I believe in that deeply.

But intensity also has a shadow.

It can turn another person's pace into an accusation.

Why don't you care as much as I do?

Why aren't you moving faster?

Why don't you see what's at stake?

Maybe because they are not me.

That sounds obvious.

It took me decades to appreciate how often I forget it.

Here is a contradiction I continue to live with:

I don't want to lower standards.

And:

I don't want my standards to become weapons.

Both matter.

The easy answer is to choose one.

Demand more.

Or be more compassionate.

But what if compassion sometimes requires demanding more?

And what if demanding more sometimes requires compassion?

Now the slogans stop helping.

Now judgment begins.

And judgment can be wrong.

That's the tension.

I think masculinity has often struggled with this.

At least the masculinity I absorbed growing up.

A man is strong.

Don't complain.

Handle your business.

Protect your family.

Work.

Endure.

Those messages can produce admirable qualities.

Resilience.

Reliability.

Courage.

Self-control.

They can also produce men who don't know how to ask for help.

Men who translate fear into anger.

Men who think tenderness makes them weak.

Men who demand emotional honesty from others while remaining mysteries to themselves.

So what do we do?

Throw strength away?

No.

At least I don't want to.

I want strength.

I also want vulnerability.

Not vulnerability replacing strength.

Integrated with it.

That is much harder.

A man who cannot cry is not automatically strong.

A man who cries isn't automatically emotionally healthy.

See how quickly binary thinking returns?

We discover one cultural mistake and reverse the equation.

That doesn't solve anything.

A person can be vulnerable manipulatively.

A person can be stoic out of genuine courage.

Context matters.

Motives matter.

Patterns matter.

Consequences matter.

There's that word again.

Matter.

Everything matters.

No wonder certainty feels so good.

I think this is why people become ideological.

Ideology reduces cognitive rent.

It gives you a furnished apartment inside reality.

The big questions have already been answered.

Move in.

Left.

Right.

Religious.

Secular.

Libertarian.

Collectivist.

Traditionalist.

Progressive.

The furniture differs.

The appeal doesn't.

You know where the couch goes.

Then something happens that doesn't fit the room.

Now you have a choice.

Move the furniture.

Or pretend you didn't see it.

Human beings are excellent at not seeing furniture.

I don't think ideology is useless.

We need frameworks.

Frameworks help organize reality.

Again, the mistake is confusing map with territory.

A framework should help me ask better questions.

Not prevent questions.

The minute an ideology tells me what evidence I'm allowed to notice, it has stopped being a tool.

It owns me.

This applies to my own philosophy too.

If I start worshiping nuance, nuance becomes ideology.

That's worth repeating.

If I start worshiping nuance, nuance becomes ideology.

Then every strong conclusion looks unsophisticated.

Every moral boundary looks simplistic.

Every decisive person looks dangerous.

That's nonsense.

Sometimes the evidence is clear.

Sometimes the answer really is no.

Sometimes cruelty is cruelty.

Sometimes dishonesty is dishonesty.

Sometimes a boundary doesn't require a dissertation.

Sometimes you leave.

Sometimes you fire someone.

Sometimes you bench a player.

Sometimes you end the relationship.

Sometimes you say:

Enough.

Non-binary thinking does not mean abandoning the capacity to judge.

It means remembering that judgment should remain accountable to reality.

There is a phrase people use:

"Both sides."

Those words can be an invitation to think.

They can also be an escape hatch.

Sometimes two sides are not equally responsible.

Sometimes one side has much more power.

Sometimes evidence heavily favors one interpretation.

Pretending symmetry where none exists is not nuance.

It's laziness with good manners.

That's important to me.

I don't want non-binary thinking becoming false equivalence.

Balance is not truth.

Truth may be unbalanced.

A baseball game demonstrates this nicely.

Two teams play.

Both make mistakes.

Both want to win.

Both have families cheering.

That doesn't mean they played equally well.

One team can lose 14-2.

Recognizing the humanity of both teams doesn't require pretending the score is close.

Empathy does not require arithmetic dishonesty.

That's a useful lesson outside baseball too.

I can recognize someone's humanity and still believe his behavior was wrong.

I can understand why someone did something and still hold him accountable.

I can forgive and still not trust.

I can love somebody and not want him in my life.

I can oppose someone's ideas and defend his dignity.

I can admire somebody and refuse to excuse what he did.

Those sentences used to feel contradictory.

Now they feel necessary.

One tension I think about constantly is intention versus outcome.

We already touched it.

Good intentions matter.

Outcomes matter.

Which matters more?

Depends.

Annoying answer.

If I accidentally step on your foot, intention matters.

You probably evaluate me differently than if I stomped on it deliberately.

But your foot still hurts.

Outcome matters.

If I repeatedly step on your foot while insisting I mean well, eventually my intention becomes less interesting.

Pattern changes the equation.

There is no single formula.

That's why moral life requires judgment rather than slogans.

And judgment requires humility because I will sometimes get it wrong.

That sentence is easy to write.

Living it is much harder.

I don't like making mistakes that affect other people.

Especially people I love.

But trying to eliminate that possibility can become controlling.

If I must guarantee the outcome, I must control the variables.

People hate being variables.

Children especially.

Players too.

Spouses definitely.

Maybe control is certainty's physical expression.

If I can't know what will happen, I'll make it happen.

Push harder.

Manage more.

Advise more.

Check again.

Explain again.

Intervene.

Correct.

Protect.

And sometimes all that effort is useful.

Other times it is fear wearing work boots.

I've worn those boots.

There is a line between preparation and anxiety.

I still can't always see it.

Preparation asks:

What can I reasonably do?

Anxiety asks:

What else can I do so I don't have to feel uncertain?

Those are different questions.

I have answered the second one many times while telling myself I was answering the first.

Non-binary thinking also changes how I look at failure.

Was the decision wrong because the outcome was bad?

Not necessarily.

That's uncomfortable.

A coach can make the correct pitching change and the reliever gives up a home run.

A parent can allow a child independence and the child makes a painful mistake.

An investor can make a rational decision and lose money.

A doctor can recommend a reasonable treatment and the patient gets worse.

A person can trust someone who appeared trustworthy and get betrayed.

Outcome matters.

But outcome alone doesn't prove the quality of the decision.

Conversely, a bad decision can produce a good outcome.

The kid swings at a terrible pitch and hits a double.

Do I praise the result?

Baseball gives this lesson constantly.

Bad process.

Good outcome.

Good process.

Bad outcome.

If I judge everything by the immediate result, I train myself to worship luck.

Life does the same thing.

The irresponsible businessman becomes rich.

The careful investor loses everything in a catastrophe.

The reckless driver gets home safely.

The healthy person gets sick.

The cruel person lives to ninety-five.

The generous person dies young.

We want a moral scoreboard.

The universe declines to provide one.

That doesn't make morality meaningless.

It means morality cannot depend on guaranteed rewards.

Maybe that is one of adulthood's hardest truths.

Doing the right thing does not guarantee the right outcome.

There goes another quick victory.

Now why behave well?

Not because the universe promised compensation.

Maybe because character is partly what I choose when outcomes remain uncertain.

That's harder.

Cleaner too.

I think about the phrase **will to power.**

People hear power and imagine domination.

Control.

Winning.

Conquest.

But the version that interests me is far more difficult.

Can I exercise power over my need for certainty?

Can I restrain the impulse to turn fear into control?

Can I hold competing truths without becoming paralyzed?

Can I make a decision, accept responsibility and remain willing to revise?

Can I endure being misunderstood without immediately constructing a defense?

Can I let someone I love choose differently?

That looks like power to me.

Not dramatic power.

Internal power.

No applause.

No medal.

Just regulation.

The older I get, the more impressed I am by people who can say:

"I believe this strongly, but I could be wrong."

That sentence contains tension.

Conviction and humility.

Most of us think one cancels the other.

I'm increasingly convinced they need each other.

Conviction without humility becomes fanaticism.

Humility without conviction becomes paralysis.

Hold both.

There it is again.

Hold both.

Maybe that should be written over every political chamber in the country.

HOLD BOTH.

Liberty and responsibility.

Individual rights and collective consequences.

Markets and safeguards.

Tradition and revision.

Security and freedom.

Justice and mercy.

Borders and humanity.

Order and dissent.

History keeps trying to force us to choose one forever.

Reality keeps bringing the other one back.

The same is true inside my house.

Love and boundaries.

Support and independence.

Money and enjoyment.

Preparation and spontaneity.

Work and rest.

Giving and protecting resources.

Aging and ambition.

Acceptance and improvement.

Even this book contains the central contradiction:

Accept yourself.

And:

Change.

How?

If I fully accept myself, why change?

If I constantly need improvement, have I accepted myself?

I don't know that there is a final answer.

Maybe self-acceptance creates the safety required for honest change.

Maybe change without acceptance becomes self-hatred.

Maybe acceptance without change becomes complacency.

Again.

Tension.

This book is called *How To Get Better.*

Not:

How To Arrive.

I'm starting to appreciate the difference.

Arrival suggests completion.

Better suggests movement.

Direction.

Adjustment.

Correction.

No finish line.

That may disappoint some people.

It disappoints part of me.

I want completion.

I want to solve the equation.

But maybe the equation keeps changing because I do.

The world does.

The people around me do.

The answer that worked at thirty may become destructive at sixty.

That isn't failure.

That's context.

I think back to the boy I was.

He wanted certainty because certainty looked like strength.

Know where you're going.

Know what you believe.

Know who you are.

Don't hesitate.

There was value in that.

Hesitation can get you hurt.

But the man I'm becoming sees another kind of strength.

The willingness to say:

I don't know yet.

Or:

I know enough to act, but not enough to become arrogant about it.

Or even:

I was wrong. I'm changing course.

Maybe changing course isn't weakness.

Maybe refusing to change because people are watching is.

There are no quick victories here.

That's Confession Number Five.

Non-binary thinking hasn't made my life easier.

In some ways it has made it harder.

More questions.

More hesitation before judgment.

More awareness of tradeoffs.

More responsibility.

Less emotional certainty.

Sometimes less belonging.

Sometimes less peace.

And yet I don't want to go backward.

Because the old certainty was cheaper partly because somebody else was paying for it.

The player I misunderstood.

The family member I judged.

The person I reduced to a political category.

The younger version of myself I condemned because I now possess information he didn't have.

Certainty sends invoices.

We just don't always receive them.

So I am learning to live inside permanent tension.

Not happily.

Let's not exaggerate.

I still want answers.

I still want clarity.

I still want the satisfying click of something becoming settled.

But I'm beginning to recognize that some of the most important human questions may never click.

How much is enough?

When should I let go?

When should I fight?

When should I forgive?

How much should I sacrifice?

When does ambition become vanity?

When does patience become fear?

When does love become control?

When does self-acceptance become complacency?

When does discipline become cruelty?

No umpire is coming.

No scoreboard.

No tribe can permanently answer them for me.

I have to decide.

Then remain awake enough to reconsider.

Maybe that's the work.

Make the best decision I can.

Own it.

Watch what happens.

Learn.

Adjust.

And repeat.

No victory lap.

No final version of myself waiting at the finish line.

Just the next pitch.

And the uncomfortable freedom of admitting that I don't know exactly what's coming.

SIX: HOLDING TWO OPPOSING THOUGHTS AT ONCE FEELS LIKE WEAKNESS TO A DIVIDED WORLD

Confession #6: I Have Sometimes Mistaken Internal Tension for Indecision Because the World Rewards Certainty More Than Thoughtfulness

There are moments when I envy people who are absolutely certain.

Not because I think they're always right.

Because they look comfortable.

There is a posture certainty gives a person.

Shoulders back.

Voice steady.

Answer ready.

No visible static.

No hesitation.

No internal committee meeting.

Just:

This is what I believe.

I understand the appeal.

I have lived inside that posture.

It feels powerful.

It also feels efficient.

The world moves quickly.

People ask questions quickly.

They want answers quickly.

What do you think?

Whose side are you on?

Do you support this or oppose it?

Good or bad?

Strong or weak?

Yes or no?

And sometimes the truthful answer is:

Both.

Or:

Neither.

Or:

I don't know yet.

Or worse:

I believe two things that don't sit comfortably together.

That answer rarely satisfies anyone.

It doesn't even always satisfy me.

Because tension feels like failure when you've been taught that clarity is the goal.

I grew up around men who valued decisiveness.

There was dignity in it.

You didn't spend all day narrating every emotion.

You made decisions.

You handled problems.

You took responsibility.

There is still a part of me that admires that.

I don't want to become a man who needs forty-five minutes of philosophical reflection to decide whether the garbage needs to go out.

Sometimes you pick up the bag.

Sometimes you make the call.

Sometimes you say no.

Sometimes you move.

Life requires decisiveness.

But somewhere along the way I confused decisiveness with certainty.

They are not the same thing.

I can be uncertain and still act.

That might be one of the most important things I have learned.

A pitcher can be unsure whether the hitter is sitting fastball.

He still has to throw something.

A coach can be unsure whether removing the pitcher is the correct decision.

He still has to decide.

A parent can be unsure whether intervening helps or harms.

A decision still arrives.

The world doesn't pause while I achieve philosophical clarity.

Action under uncertainty is not weakness.

It is normal.

What matters is whether I can accept that uncertainty without pretending it isn't there.

Pretending feels better.

Pretending lets me say:

"I knew exactly what to do."

Sometimes hindsight assists.

After the decision works, the uncertainty disappears from memory.

Of course I knew.

Of course that was the right move.

Success edits the footage.

Failure does too.

When the outcome is bad, I may remember every doubt as though I should have known better.

This is one of the ways memory becomes unfair.

It judges yesterday using information delivered today.

I do this to myself.

I do it to other people.

I do it to coaches.

Presidents.

Parents.

Managers.

Doctors.

Anyone making decisions in motion.

We look backward with the final score visible and wonder how they could possibly have missed what now seems obvious.

The final score wasn't visible then.

That matters.

This does not excuse bad decisions.

It complicates judgment.

There's a difference.

That's another pair of thoughts I have to hold together.

People should be accountable for decisions.

And:

People often make decisions without complete information.

Both are true.

Accountability without context becomes cruelty.

Context without accountability becomes excuse.

I need both.

There is no slogan for that.

I think this is where divided cultures become psychologically expensive.

The culture does not simply ask me to have an opinion.

It asks me to perform certainty.

Performance matters.

If I hesitate, someone may interpret hesitation as weakness.

If I qualify, someone may assume I lack conviction.

If I acknowledge the other side's legitimate concern, my own side may wonder whether I've betrayed them.

If I say a policy I support has costs, somebody hears opposition.

If I say a person I criticize has virtues, somebody hears endorsement.

Everything gets flattened.

Approval.

Condemnation.

Friend.

Enemy.

The middle space becomes suspicious.

Sometimes I think social media has turned human complexity into a game show.

You have ten seconds.

Choose.

Thumb up.

Thumb down.

Heart.

Angry face.

Share.

Block.

Follow.

Unfollow.

The platforms didn't invent tribalism.

Human beings brought that with us.

But the machinery is beautifully designed for simplification.

Certainty travels faster.

Outrage travels faster.

Confidence travels faster.

A person saying:

"I'm still thinking about this because the evidence seems mixed"

does not generate the same electricity as:

THESE PEOPLE ARE DESTROYING EVERYTHING.

Maybe that is part of the problem.

Certainty is shareable.

Ambivalence isn't.

I use the word ambivalence carefully.

People hear ambivalence and think indifference.

That's not what I mean.

Sometimes ambivalence means I care enough to feel competing obligations.

I want to help.

I also want to avoid creating dependency.

I want justice.

I also worry about unintended consequences.

I want freedom.

I also recognize that freedom produces costs for other people.

I want discipline.

I also refuse humiliation.

I want my child safe.

I also want my child free.

I want to tell the truth.

I also don't want truth becoming an excuse for cruelty.

Those tensions don't emerge because I don't care.

They emerge because I care about more than one thing.

That's an important distinction.

Sometimes the person who looks most conflicted is not weak.

He may be carrying more values at once.

The confident person may have simply dropped one.

Imagine a parent standing outside a child's bedroom.

The child is struggling.

The parent knows it.

Every instinct says:

Go in.

Fix it.

Give advice.

Call somebody.

Make the discomfort disappear.

Another voice says:

Let the child work through this.

Give space.

Trust what you've taught.

Now what?

Both impulses can come from love.

Intervention.

Restraint.

Which is loving?

Depends.

That word again.

Depends.

There are circumstances where not intervening is negligence.

There are circumstances where intervention steals growth.

No formula tells me exactly where the line sits tonight.

The tension isn't evidence that the parent is weak.

The tension may be evidence that both responsibilities are being felt.

I have lived that tension as a father.

I have also failed it.

Sometimes I've given advice because it was useful.

Sometimes I've given advice because silence made me anxious.

Those can sound identical coming out of my mouth.

"Have you thought about...?"

A harmless phrase.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Sometimes I'm offering perspective.

Sometimes I'm transferring anxiety.

The words don't reveal the difference.

The motive does.

And motives are slippery.

Especially mine.

The same happens in coaching.

I want to correct a player.

I also want him to discover.

I want him to know I believe in him.

I also want him to understand that belief doesn't eliminate standards.

I want him comfortable enough to make aggressive mistakes.

I also want him accountable enough not to repeat careless ones.

I want him to trust me.

I also want him to outgrow needing me.

Those goals do not align perfectly.

Good.

Maybe they shouldn't.

I have thought a lot about the phrase:

You are your own best coach.

I say it to players because I believe it.

But if I truly believe it, there is an expiration date on my authority.

Not my responsibility.

My authority.

At some point, the player has to become capable of saying:

"Coach, I hear you. I think something else works better for me."

What do I do then?

If I'm secure, maybe I ask why.

If I'm insecure, I may interpret disagreement as disrespect.

There's the test.

Not whether I say I value independent thinking.

Whether I tolerate it when independence points away from me.

That hurts the ego.

I can admit it.

There is a small pleasure in being needed.

Parents know this.

Coaches know this.

Teachers know this.

Mentors know this.

People who advise other people know this.

Someone asks:

"What do you think?"

And suddenly you matter.

Your experience matters.

Your voice matters.

Beautiful.

Then one day they stop asking.

That is supposed to be success.

Funny how success can feel like rejection.

Maybe that's another contradiction I need to hold.

I want to matter.

And:

I want the people I love to become less dependent on my mattering.

That one gets me.

Because the deepest expression of some kinds of love is to make yourself progressively less necessary.

No one gives you a trophy for that.

There is no applause when your child doesn't need your answer.

No standing ovation when your player corrects himself before you speak.

No ceremony when someone you've mentored stops calling because he has learned to trust his own judgment.

Part of you thinks:

Good.

Another part whispers:

Do I still matter?

Both voices exist.

Pretending otherwise doesn't make me noble.

It makes me dishonest.

This book keeps returning to ego because ego is resourceful.

It can live anywhere.

Even inside selflessness.

I can help somebody and quietly enjoy being the person who helps.

I can give advice and tell myself it is entirely about them.

I can write a free book and tell myself the absence of a price tag makes the act selfless.

Maybe partly.

But ego can work for free.

It does not require money.

Sometimes attention is enough.

Sometimes gratitude.

Sometimes simply knowing that I influenced someone.

I don't think that invalidates the act.

That's another two thoughts.

An action can contain ego.

And:

The action can still be useful or generous.

I used to want purity.

Pure motives.

Pure generosity.

Pure love.

I'm less convinced purity exists.

Human motives mix.

Love and fear.

Generosity and ego.

Discipline and control.

Courage and vanity.

That doesn't mean nothing matters.

It means the audit needs more columns.

People often want moral simplicity.

Did you do it for the right reason?

Yes or no.

What if I did it for six reasons?

Three admirable.

Two embarrassing.

One I still don't understand.

Does the action become good?

Bad?

Human?

Maybe human is the most accurate starting point.

Holding opposing thoughts doesn't mean all thoughts are equally valid.

That distinction matters.

I can hold:

"I understand why he did it"

and:

"What he did was wrong."

Understanding does not erase judgment.

I can hold:

"She suffered terribly"

and:

"Her suffering does not justify what she did to someone else."

I can hold:

"I benefited from a system"

and:

"I worked hard."

One truth does not automatically cancel the other.

That's where binary thinking fails us.

We think acknowledging one truth somehow confiscates the other.

If privilege existed, effort didn't.

If effort existed, privilege didn't.

If trauma influenced behavior, responsibility disappears.

If responsibility exists, trauma becomes irrelevant.

Why?

Who made that rule?

Reality certainly didn't.

I can have advantages and work hard.

I can have disadvantages and make bad choices.

I can be hurt and hurt others.

I can love someone and resent them.

I can admire my parents and recognize their mistakes.

I can be grateful for my upbringing and acknowledge what frightened me.

I can believe my generation learned valuable lessons and admit we got plenty wrong.

I can love America and criticize America.

I can criticize America and still appreciate things it gave me.

I can believe capitalism has produced extraordinary innovation and believe markets can generate brutal outcomes.

I can believe government can protect people and believe institutions can become arrogant, wasteful or coercive.

These aren't necessarily contradictions.

Sometimes they are simply reality refusing to join a team.

I think a divided world finds this threatening because complexity interferes with moral theater.

The theater requires characters.

Heroes.

Villains.

Victims.

Oppressors.

You need stable casting.

Then somebody arrives and says:

"The victim behaved badly."

Or:

"The person who did harm was also harmed."

Now the script breaks.

People think you're excusing someone.

Maybe sometimes you are.

But sometimes you're describing the complete picture.

A complete picture can be morally inconvenient.

That doesn't make it false.

This becomes particularly difficult with history.

History is filled with monsters.

Also ordinary people.

Sometimes they are the same people.

Human beings commit atrocities and go home to families they love.

That fact is not a defense.

It is a warning.

If monsters looked like monsters every minute, human beings would have less to worry about.

The frightening reality is that cruelty can coexist with tenderness.

Ideology can coexist with intelligence.

Prejudice can coexist with generosity.

Cowardice can coexist with bravery.

That's why confronting evil only in people we already dislike teaches us very little.

The dangerous question is:

What in me could become dangerous under the right conditions?

That question is much less satisfying than condemning history.

I don't want to exaggerate moral equivalence.

I need to keep saying that because nuance can be abused.

Recognizing humanity in everyone does not mean everyone behaved equally.

Holding two thoughts does not mean refusing judgment.

The murderer and victim are not morally interchangeable because both were complicated human beings.

The oppressor and oppressed do not magically become equivalent because both experienced fear.

Power matters.

Agency matters.

Intent matters.

Scale matters.

Consequences matter.

Nuance should sharpen moral judgment.

Not dissolve it.

I think of a scale.

Binary thinking wants one object on one side.

Good.

Bad.

Nuance adds weight.

History.

Context.

Power.

Intention.

Outcome.

Pattern.

Choice.

Constraint.

Then we still have to judge.

The scale doesn't disappear.

We simply stop pretending one feather tells us everything.

There are times when holding opposing thoughts feels physically uncomfortable.

You can feel it in conversation.

Someone says something you agree with.

Then follows with something you don't.

You want to sort them.

Are you with me or not?

But humans aren't political platforms.

They don't arrive with standardized positions.

At least they shouldn't.

I have friends, acquaintances, players, parents, family members and people I respect whose views sometimes make me think:

How the hell did you get there?

Good.

That means I'm still encountering people rather than copies.

I sometimes wonder whether I would enjoy a world where everyone agreed with me.

For about forty-eight hours.

Maybe less.

Then I'd probably start arguing with myself.

Which I already do.

That may be the final proof that disagreement isn't the real problem.

The real problem is what disagreement does to identity.

If your disagreement threatens my sense that I'm intelligent, moral or respected, then the conversation stops being about the subject.

Now I'm defending myself.

This is why arguments escalate.

The topic is immigration.

The actual fight is:

Do you think I'm stupid?

The topic is parenting.

The actual fight is:

Do you think I'm a bad father?

The topic is coaching.

The actual fight is:

Do you respect my experience?

The topic is politics.

The actual fight is:

Do you think people like me are bad?

Once identity enters the room, facts need body armor.

I've done this.

Someone questions my coaching.

I could hear:

"Here's another perspective."

Instead I hear:

"You don't know baseball."

Now decades of experience stand up.

Objection.

I've coached this long.

I've seen this.

I've done that.

All true.

Completely irrelevant if the criticism is correct.

Experience deserves respect.

It doesn't deserve immunity.

The hardest opposing thoughts may be these:

I know a lot.

And:

I may be wrong.

That combination used to feel unstable.

Now I think it's the only intellectually honest place for experience to live.

I should know more at fifty-something than I knew at twenty.

If I don't, something went wrong.

But if knowing more convinces me I cannot be wrong, something also went wrong.

Experience should produce pattern recognition.

It should also produce scars from predictions that failed.

Every scar should whisper:

Careful.

Maybe wisdom is not certainty accumulated.

Maybe it's uncertainty refined.

The young person says:

"I don't know because I haven't seen enough."

The older person might say:

"I don't know because I have seen enough to understand how many things can happen."

Those are different kinds of uncertainty.

One empty.

One crowded.

I want the second.

I also have to resist romanticizing uncertainty.

There are people who avoid commitment by pretending complexity prevents decisions.

I've done versions of that too.

Think longer.

Research more.

Ask one more question.

Build one more scenario.

At some point the open mind can become an open door through which all responsibility escapes.

You still have to decide.

That is the burden.

Holding opposing thoughts is not an excuse to hold no position.

It is preparation for holding a position without becoming possessed by it.

I like that distinction.

Hold the belief. Don't let the belief hold you.

A belief should remain something I can inspect.

If criticism of the belief feels identical to criticism of me, I've merged too completely.

Then changing my mind feels like dying.

No wonder people cling to bad ideas.

They're not just revising an opinion.

They're defending a self.

I understand that emotionally.

I've changed my mind about things over decades.

Sometimes slowly.

Sometimes embarrassingly.

There are positions I once held confidently that I now see differently.

I could hide them.

Pretend I always knew.

That's another trick memory offers.

But then I lose the evidence that change is possible.

I'd rather keep the old versions around.

Not to shame them.

To remind myself:

That guy was certain too.

Useful information.

There is a version of myself twenty years from now—if I'm lucky enough to meet him—who might read this and shake his head.

"Jose, you still didn't get it."

I hope so.

Not because I want to be wrong.

Because if everything I believe now survives untouched for twenty years, I probably stopped investigating.

A living mind should leave behind dead opinions.

That's painful.

Confession Number Six isn't really about logic.

It's about grief.

Every belief I release takes a little identity with it.

Maybe that's why changing our minds can feel humiliating.

We don't simply say:

"This proposition was incorrect."

We hear:

"Who I was was foolish."

But the person I was used the information he had, the fears he had, the incentives he had, the emotional maturity he had.

Sometimes he was foolish.

Sometimes arrogant.

Sometimes scared.

Sometimes simply inexperienced.

I don't have to despise him.

I can thank him for getting me here and refuse to let him drive.

Maybe that's another pair:

Forgive the old version of yourself.

And:

Do not let forgiveness become permission to repeat him.

Both.

Always both.

I think of the baseball field again.

The hitter stands in the box.

He must be aggressive.

He must also be patient.

Two apparently opposing instructions.

Aggressive.

Patient.

Every good hitter understands the paradox.

Aggressive does not mean swing at everything.

Patient does not mean wait passively.

You wait aggressively.

Ready.

Present.

Prepared.

Then the pitch reveals what action is required.

That might be the best metaphor I know for living with tension.

Aggressive patience.

The body prepared to move.

The mind prepared to wait.

No contradiction once you understand the task.

Maybe many contradictions work that way.

Strong and vulnerable.

Confident and humble.

Disciplined and compassionate.

Independent and connected.

Ambitious and grateful.

Skeptical and open.

Committed and revisable.

Present and preparing.

Maybe the problem isn't that these qualities oppose each other.

Maybe the problem is my desire to maximize one without carrying the other.

Strength without vulnerability hardens.

Vulnerability without strength collapses.

Confidence without humility blinds.

Humility without confidence shrinks.

Discipline without empathy punishes.

Empathy without discipline can abandon standards.

Ambition without gratitude devours.

Gratitude without ambition can become an excuse for stagnation.

The tension is the balancing mechanism.

I used to want to eliminate that tension.

Now I think tension might be evidence that the system is functioning.

A bridge needs tension.

A muscle grows through tension.

A baseball player stores energy through tension.

Too much and something tears.

Too little and nothing moves.

The goal isn't zero tension.

It's useful tension.

Maybe the mind works similarly.

I don't know.

That's a phrase I'm getting comfortable writing.

Maybe too comfortable.

Careful.

Even uncertainty can become performance.

Look how humble I am.

There goes the ego again.

I have to keep laughing at that.

If I take my self-confrontation too seriously, I'll eventually make a religion out of myself.

Nobody needs that.

Least of all me.

So here is Confession Number Six.

I have sometimes felt weak because I could see more than one truth.

I have mistaken hesitation for cowardice.

I have envied people whose certainty seemed cleaner than my questions.

I have occasionally performed certainty because I wanted to look decisive.

And I have sometimes hidden behind complexity because I was afraid to decide.

All of those things can be true.

At once.

There's the lesson.

I am trying to become the kind of man who can say:

I love you and I disagree with you.

I respect you and I think you're wrong.

I believe this and I remain open to evidence.

I forgive you and I don't trust you yet.

I forgive myself and I expect better.

I am proud of what I've done and aware of how insignificant it is.

I want to matter and I know the universe does not require me.

I want control and I know control is mostly illusion.

I want to become better and I accept that I will never become complete.

Those sentences carry weight.

Good.

I don't want lighter sentences anymore.

The divided world may interpret that tension as weakness.

Maybe sometimes it is.

I can't guarantee that every hesitation is wisdom.

Sometimes hesitation is fear.

Sometimes certainty is courage.

Sometimes I should stop thinking and act.

The work is distinguishing which is which.

No philosopher can do that for me in the moment.

No tribe.

No chapter.

No slogan.

I have to pay attention.

The boy I once was wanted the world to become simpler.

The man writing this is beginning to understand that maybe the task is different.

Not simplify the world.

Become strong enough to carry more of it.

The contradiction.

The ambiguity.

The competing obligations.

The possibility that somebody I love is wrong.

The possibility that somebody I dislike is right.

The possibility that I am both better than I once was and still capable of the same old bullshit.

Carry it.

Don't collapse it prematurely.

Don't resolve the tension just to make the anxiety disappear.

Stay there long enough to learn something.

Then act.

Maybe that's weakness.

Maybe it's strength.

I suppose I have to hold both possibilities too.

SEVEN: THE UNIVERSE IS INDIFFERENT TO MY POTENTIAL, MY PLANS, AND MY PAIN

Confession #7: I Spent Years Quietly Assuming That Effort, Good Intentions, and Love Ought to Purchase Some Protection from Catastrophe

The universe has never read my résumé.

It does not know where I grew up.

It does not care how hard I worked.

It does not know how much I love my family.

It does not care how many innings I coached, how many books I read, how many mistakes I confronted, or how many good intentions I carried into a room.

The universe does not owe me a return phone call.

It does not owe me fairness.

It does not owe me longevity.

It does not owe my wife another year.

It does not owe my daughter safety.

It does not owe a twelve-year-old baseball player a healthy arm because he worked harder than everybody else.

It does not owe the good man a peaceful death.

It does not owe the cruel man an early one.

It does not care about potential.

That word is ours.

Potential.

We love it.

Coaches especially.

"This kid has so much potential."

Maybe.

Potential is a story we tell about the future.

The future has not agreed to participate.

That is difficult for me.

Maybe more difficult than I realized.

Because underneath all my talk about uncertainty, self-confrontation, and insignificance, there remains a primitive part of me that wants a deal.

Not immortality.

I know better than that.

Just a little moral insurance.

I try.

I love.

I prepare.

I help.

I don't intentionally hurt people.

Surely that buys me something.

Doesn't it?

No.

That answer used to frighten me.

Now it frightens me and frees me.

Both.

There it is again.

A boy learns fairness early.

Not philosophical fairness.

Playground fairness.

You had your turn.

Now I get mine.

That was out.

You cheated.

He started it.

I was here first.

Those sentences might be some of humanity's earliest attempts at jurisprudence.

Children have an almost religious belief in fairness.

Adults pretend to outgrow it.

We don't.

We simply make the arguments longer.

I paid into the system.

I followed the rules.

I raised my children right.

I exercised.

I saved money.

I showed up.

I treated people well.

I did what I was supposed to do.

There is an invisible sentence after all of those statements:

So this should not have happened to me.

I understand that sentence.

I have felt versions of it.

Maybe everyone has.

But reality never signed the contract.

Baseball teaches this early if you are willing to listen.

Hit the ball perfectly.

Right at the shortstop.

Out.

Break your bat.

Ball bloops over second base.

Single.

That is baseball.

Do everything right.

Fail.

Do something poorly.

Succeed.

A hitter goes 0-for-4 and hits four rockets.

Another goes 3-for-4 with three ground balls that find holes.

Who had the better day?

The scoreboard says one thing.

The process says another.

Neither tells the whole story.

We call baseball a game of failure.

I think it's also a game of indifference.

The ball doesn't know how much you practiced.

It has no interest in your confidence.

It does not alter its flight because your parents drove six hours to watch.

It lands where physics sends it.

That can feel cruel.

It isn't.

Cruelty requires intention.

The baseball is indifferent.

So is gravity.

So is rain.

So is disease.

So is time.

Indifference is harder to hate because there is nobody to blame.

I used to think that made the world colder.

Maybe it does.

But blame can be strangely comforting.

If someone is responsible, at least the event has a shape.

A villain.

A cause.

An explanation.

Indifference offers none.

Sometimes the answer to:

"Why me?"

is:

Why not you?

That sentence is almost unbearable.

I don't mean it cruelly.

I mean it literally.

Why should probability skip my house?

Because I'm a good person?

According to whom?

Because I love deeply?

So do millions of people who bury children.

Because I prepare?

So did people whose plans vanished in one phone call.

Because I understand risk?

Understanding risk is not immunity from it.

The tornado does not check my philosophy before choosing the roof.

I think this is why catastrophe feels personal even when it isn't.

The world changes abruptly, and we experience it from the only perspective available:

ours.

The diagnosis is mine.

The accident happened to my family.

The job disappeared from my life.

The person died from my world.

Of course it feels personal.

Pain is experienced personally.

But personal experience does not prove personal selection.

That's a difficult distinction.

The event matters enormously to me.

I may matter not at all to the event.

That sentence cuts against almost everything modern life sells us.

We are constantly told we matter.

Our opinions matter.

Our brands matter.

Our stories matter.

Our individual potential matters.

And at the human level, I agree.

We should treat each other as though lives matter.

A child's fear matters to me.

My wife's pain matters to me.

A stranger's suffering should matter morally.

But cosmic importance is a different category.

I can matter deeply to another human being while remaining completely irrelevant to the universe.

That is not an insult.

I am starting to think it is liberation.

Because if the universe does not owe me anything, perhaps I can stop negotiating with it.

I don't have to bargain.

Be good and tragedy will avoid me.

Work hard and success will come.

Love deeply and you won't be abandoned.

Eat correctly and you won't get sick.

Save carefully and you won't experience financial disaster.

Raise children properly and they will make good decisions.

Prepare your players and you will win.

What exhausting superstition.

Useful behavior becomes magical thinking.

I can still eat well.

Save.

Love.

Prepare.

Teach.

Exercise.

Work.

But not as payment.

As choice.

That changes the relationship.

I want to be careful here.

There is a lazy version of this philosophy.

Nothing is guaranteed, so why bother?

That's not what I'm saying.

Risk is not randomness in every direction.

Behavior matters.

Smoking changes probabilities.

Saving money changes probabilities.

Education changes probabilities.

Practice changes probabilities.

Wearing a seat belt changes probabilities.

Throwing strikes changes probabilities.

Playing defense changes probabilities.

Trust changes probabilities.

Nothing I am saying erases cause and effect.

But probability is not promise.

That distinction is everything.

A healthy person can become sick.

That does not mean health is irrelevant.

A disciplined investor can lose money.

That does not make discipline pointless.

A good parent can raise a child who makes destructive choices.

That does not make parenting meaningless.

The universe allows probability without guaranteeing outcome.

We seem to hate that arrangement.

I know I do.

I think one of my deepest temptations is converting good process into anticipated reward.

I do the work.

Therefore something should happen.

I prepare the team.

Therefore we should win.

I explain something carefully.

Therefore the player should understand.

I love somebody.

Therefore they should receive the love the way I intended it.

I write honestly.

Therefore the reader should understand me.

I confront my flaws.

Therefore I should become better.

Maybe.

But there is no therefore.

Only possibility.

That is painful for an autodidact.

Learning creates an illusion of control.

Read enough and maybe you can see around the corner.

Study the past and maybe you can anticipate the future.

Understand incentives.

Understand psychology.

Understand yourself.

Maybe catastrophe becomes less surprising.

Perhaps.

Knowledge is useful.

But the more I learn, the more I realize how much remains outside the frame.

I can model.

I cannot command.

I can prepare.

I cannot insure existence.

There are too many variables.

Some visible.

Most not.

I think about all the plans people make on a Monday morning.

Flights.

Dinner reservations.

Retirement dates.

Birthday parties.

College applications.

Practices.

Business meetings.

Dentist appointments.

Weddings.

Then somewhere, somebody receives a phone call.

The calendar becomes absurd.

All those little boxes.

10:00 meeting.

12:30 lunch.

3:00 conference call.

And suddenly:

cancer.

accident.

death.

war.

collapse.

The human mind schedules.

Reality interrupts.

That doesn't mean stop scheduling.

It means maybe hold the calendar with a softer grip.

I have not always done that.

I like plans.

Plans calm me.

Numbers calm me.

Dates calm me.

If I can identify the month something should happen, part of me relaxes.

Mortgage paid by then.

Savings reaches this number by then.

Retirement becomes possible around there.

This is reasonable.

Planning is part of responsibility.

But I have also noticed the emotional trick.

A projection starts as a model.

Then slowly becomes an expectation.

Then the expectation becomes a promise I don't remember anyone making.

If reality deviates, I feel cheated.

By whom?

The spreadsheet?

It never promised anything.

I did.

To myself.

Then blamed reality for breaking the agreement.

That is one of the strangest forms of self-deception.

We write a future in our head and then experience reality as betrayal when it refuses the script.

Parents do this with children.

Coaches with players.

People with careers.

Couples with marriages.

Nations with history.

I did everything right.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

Maybe not.

But "supposed to" is frequently a private screenplay.

Reality never auditioned.

Death is the ultimate refusal.

I don't like writing about death abstractly because death isn't abstract when it arrives.

It is a chair that stays empty.

A number still saved in a phone.

A voice you can reconstruct but cannot hear live.

A joke that now travels only one direction.

A question that suddenly has no recipient.

Human language does strange things around death.

Passed away.

Lost.

Gone.

At peace.

Better place.

We soften the words because the fact is brutal.

The person was here.

Now the person isn't.

Whatever we believe about what follows, that earthly absence is real.

And none of our plans impress it.

When my father died, the world continued behaving with almost offensive normality.

Cars moved.

People ordered coffee.

Baseball games were played.

Someone complained about the weather.

Someone celebrated a birthday.

Someone probably laughed at a stupid joke at the exact moment I was grieving.

How dare they?

Not consciously.

But grief can create that feeling.

Don't you understand what happened?

The answer is:

They don't.

It happened to my world.

Not theirs.

The sun doesn't lower itself out of respect.

That's cosmic indifference experienced emotionally.

And yet there is another side.

My world did change.

Family changed.

Memory changed.

I changed.

So the event was cosmically insignificant and personally enormous.

Both are true.

The universe didn't care.

I did.

Maybe love exists inside that difference.

That thought has become important to me.

If cosmic indifference is real, human caring becomes more precious, not less.

The universe doesn't comfort the grieving mother.

A person does.

The universe doesn't visit the hospital.

A person does.

Gravity won't coach the scared kid through an error.

A person might.

Time does not apologize.

We can.

Maybe meaning is not something guaranteed by reality.

Maybe it is something human beings create in response to reality.

That doesn't cheapen it.

A meal isn't less meaningful because the universe didn't cook it.

I think Frankl understood something about this that still unsettles me.

Meaning does not require pleasant circumstances.

But I want to resist turning that idea into another motivational slogan.

Some suffering destroys.

Some suffering leaves trauma.

Some suffering produces nothing admirable.

People love saying:

"Everything happens for a reason."

I don't know that.

Maybe they mean it compassionately.

But sometimes that sentence feels like humanity's refusal to tolerate randomness.

A child dies.

A war destroys a family.

A drunk driver kills someone.

What reason?

I don't need an answer badly enough to invent one.

Maybe the more respectful response is:

This is terrible.

Then remain.

No explanation.

No cosmic justification.

Just presence.

That is hard for someone like me.

I explain things.

Remember?

My instinct is to build meaning.

Connect ideas.

Find the lesson.

Maybe sometimes the lesson is that I cannot fix the moment with language.

Chapter One comes back.

Cracked mirror.

The words are inadequate.

Good.

Let them be inadequate.

Maybe silence sometimes tells the truth better.

Fear of catastrophe shapes more of my behavior than I like admitting.

Money is one example.

Why save?

Partly responsibility.

Partly future freedom.

Partly fear.

What if something happens?

Health.

Family.

Property.

Work.

I can imagine scenarios rapidly.

That's useful until it isn't.

Preparation becomes accumulation.

Accumulation becomes reassurance.

Reassurance becomes dependence.

Then no amount feels like enough because no amount can purchase certainty.

There is no number that makes a mortal human being safe.

That realization is economically inconvenient.

You can have ten thousand dollars.

Need fifty.

Have fifty.

Need one hundred.

Have one hundred.

Maybe five hundred.

One million.

What about healthcare?

Long-term care?

Inflation?

Market crash?

Family emergency?

At some point the question isn't financial.

It's existential.

How much uncertainty can I tolerate?

No account balance answers that.

Fear does the same thing with children.

Protect.

Prepare.

Advise.

Monitor.

Warn.

Beautiful verbs.

Then you realize your child can be hurt anyway.

A parent confronts an impossible fact:

Love provides no force field.

That is almost intolerable.

So sometimes we try to build one out of control.

Don't do this.

Call me when you get there.

Watch this.

Avoid that.

Take this route.

Think ahead.

Maybe useful.

Often useful.

But underneath every instruction is an admission nobody likes:

I cannot guarantee your safety.

And eventually:

I won't always be here to try.

That's the void.

Coaching has a smaller version.

I care about these kids.

I want them to succeed.

I want baseball to teach them something useful.

I want them physically healthy.

I want them emotionally resilient.

I want them to remember the quiet unseen moments.

I want them to understand that they're their own best coach.

Wonderful.

Then they leave.

Some stop playing.

Some forget.

Some remember different things than I intended.

Some may remember me fondly.

Some may remember that I talked too much.

Probably both.

I don't control the legacy.

That's hard for ego.

You put something into the world.

It leaves your hands.

Books too.

This one.

I can write nineteen confessions.

Publish them.

Someone may read all of them.

Someone may read three pages.

Someone may completely misunderstand what I'm trying to say.

Someone may think I'm self-indulgent.

Maybe they're right.

Someone may see their own life differently.

Maybe.

Someone may quote a sentence I barely remember writing.

Someone may never know the book exists.

All possible.

The book cannot guarantee its own meaning.

Neither can I.

There goes control again.

Maybe this is why insignificance and mortality belong together.

If I were cosmically important, perhaps reality would negotiate with me.

It doesn't.

I am one human being born into a tiny window of time.

Before me, billions of lives.

After me, if humanity continues, billions more.

People loved.

Feared.

Worked.

Argued.

Raised children.

Buried parents.

Made money.

Lost money.

Fought wars.

Played games.

Looked at the sky.

Then disappeared.

Most names gone.

Most stories gone.

That sounds depressing if significance requires permanence.

What if it doesn't?

A baseball game ends.

Does that mean it had no meaning?

A meal ends.

A conversation ends.

Childhood ends.

A season ends.

A marriage can end.

A life ends.

Temporary does not equal meaningless.

Maybe temporariness creates value.

The inning matters because it ends.

I pay attention because the count changes.

You don't get infinite pitches.

Maybe mortality is the count.

Not punishment.

Condition.

I have been standing on baseball fields for much of my life.

There is a moment late in summer when the light changes.

You can feel the season leaving before anyone says it.

Practice looks similar.

Ball hits leather.

Kids joke.

Someone asks how many swings he gets.

But the light knows.

This is ending.

I have felt that as a coach.

You work with a group for months.

Then suddenly there are only a few games left.

You begin noticing details that were always there.

The kid's laugh.

The way another player drags his bag.

The parent who always arrives early.

The stupid joke they have repeated fifty times.

Why didn't I notice it as sharply in April?

Because ending creates attention.

Maybe death does that to life.

I don't mean we should walk around thinking constantly about dying.

That sounds exhausting.

But occasionally remembering might correct perspective.

The argument that feels enormous.

The resentment I've been polishing.

The need to prove I'm right.

The person I'm not calling.

The apology I'm postponing.

The day I'm rushing through because I'm waiting for the "important" part of life to begin.

What exactly am I waiting for?

There is a brutal equality in mortality.

Rich.

Poor.

Powerful.

Ignored.

Educated.

Uneducated.

Famous.

Unknown.

Eventually the same biological negotiation ends.

Money can improve odds.

Medicine can extend time.

Power can change circumstances.

I am not pretending social conditions don't matter.

They matter enormously.

But no class has purchased exemption.

The billionaire and the man sweeping his building share at least one appointment neither can cancel permanently.

That should humble us.

It rarely seems to.

I think of all the energy we use establishing rank.

Who has more.

Who knows more.

Who matters more.

Whose name appears where.

Who got invited.

Who received credit.

Who was promoted.

Who follows whom.

Human beings standing on a disappearing platform arguing about seating arrangements.

I participate.

Of course I do.

I'm not floating above the species.

I like recognition.

I compare.

I worry.

I want security.

Then occasionally mortality taps the glass.

And the whole hierarchy looks ridiculous.

Not meaningless.

Just smaller.

Maybe properly sized.

The universe's indifference also changes how I think about pain.

Pain often asks:

Why?

I don't always have an answer.

Maybe there is no answer accessible to me.

But another question is available:

What now?

There it is again.

The recurring question.

Not:

Why did reality violate the story I wrote?

But:

Given that this happened, what remains mine to choose?

Sometimes very little.

Maybe breathing.

Maybe calling someone.

Maybe getting out of bed.

Maybe asking for help.

Maybe sitting beside somebody.

Maybe nothing heroic.

That's enough.

I distrust philosophies that turn suffering into a performance test.

The grieving person does not owe me resilience on schedule.

This chapter isn't a pep talk.

I don't want to tell you catastrophe makes you stronger.

Sometimes catastrophe makes people weaker.

Sometimes permanently.

Sometimes survival itself is expensive.

Human beings are not required to convert every wound into wisdom.

That demand can become cruelty.

But when choice remains, even a small choice, there may be room for agency.

Not control over what happened.

Power over the next inch.

Maybe that is enough will to power for one day.

There are mornings when existence feels ordinary.

Coffee.

Traffic.

Email.

Practice.

Bills.

Laundry.

Someone needs something.

Then there are moments when the fragility of all of it becomes visible.

A hospital hallway.

A funeral.

An accident avoided by seconds.

A doctor's call.

A sudden absence.

For a while everything looks different.

You look at ordinary life and think:

This is incredible.

Not incredible because it is spectacular.

Because it is happening.

Then a week passes.

Two.

Soon you're annoyed about parking again.

That's human too.

We cannot permanently experience existence at maximum intensity.

Probably a good thing.

But maybe we can remember enough to interrupt ourselves occasionally.

Jose.

You're alive.

She's alive.

They're here.

This matters now.

Not because it will last.

Because it won't.

I am starting to think gratitude without mortality becomes decorative.

I'm grateful.

For what?

For the temporary possession of something that was never guaranteed.

That is real gratitude.

Not entitlement wearing manners.

So here is Confession Number Seven.

I have behaved as though effort ought to protect me.

As though preparation should purchase certainty.

As though love deserves immunity from loss.

As though good intentions create a small protective bubble around the people I care about.

They don't.

That scares me.

I expect it always will.

But the alternative is spending my life demanding guarantees reality cannot provide.

Maybe I can use that energy differently.

I can prepare without worshiping preparation.

Save without believing money defeats mortality.

Love without trying to imprison what I love.

Coach without demanding permanence.

Write without controlling interpretation.

Plan while remembering the plan is written in pencil.

And when catastrophe comes—and eventually some form of it comes for everyone—I hope I do not insult myself by pretending I should have been exempt.

I hope I don't convert pain into evidence that the universe betrayed me.

The universe made no promise.

People make promises.

Maybe that's why they matter.

I can promise presence.

I can promise effort.

I can promise honesty.

I can promise to try.

I can promise love.

And even those promises should be made humbly because I know my own limitations.

But they are ours to make.

The universe is indifferent.

I don't have to be.

Maybe that is the response.

Not conquering indifference.

Answering it.

The universe doesn't care whether the scared kid gets back into the batter's box.

I do.

It doesn't care whether my daughter knows I love her.

I do.

It doesn't care whether I apologize before it's too late.

I should.

It doesn't care whether I become better.

I do.

And perhaps the people affected by my becoming better do too.

That's enough.

It has to be.

Because one day I will disappear from this argument completely.

The games will continue.

People will order coffee.

Somebody will complain about the weather.

A kid will make an error on a baseball field I will never see.

The universe will remain unmoved.

And if I am lucky, somewhere before that happens, I will have learned that meaning never required the universe's permission.

EIGHT: FEAR IS NOT A SIGNAL TO RETREAT

Confession #8: Fear Is Often the Boundary Line of My Next Self

Fear has saved my life.

Fear has also wasted parts of it.

That is the problem.

The body does not always distinguish between a charging animal and a difficult conversation.

The heart accelerates.

The muscles tighten.

The mind narrows.

The same ancient machinery that once helped somebody survive a predator can activate because I am about to admit I was wrong.

That is inconvenient.

Because I have spent much of my life treating fear as information.

Sometimes it is.

Sometimes it is only sensation.

And if I confuse sensation with truth, I can build an entire life around avoiding doors I should probably open.

I know what fear feels like.

Not philosophically.

Physically.

It has a temperature.

A pressure.

A location.

Chest.

Stomach.

Jaw.

Shoulders.

It changes breathing.

It changes posture.

It changes time.

A few seconds can feel very long.

Anyone who has competed understands that.

The pitcher comes set.

The runner takes a lead.

The batter waits.

Nothing has happened yet.

And everything has already begun.

Fear lives in anticipation.

That is one of the reasons baseball has always interested me.

The game contains pauses.

Long enough for the mind to become dangerous.

In basketball, motion can rescue you.

In football, the play begins and chaos arrives.

Baseball gives you time.

Too much time.

Time to remember the last error.

Time to imagine the next one.

Time to think about your father watching.

Time to wonder what the coach thinks.

Time to hear the crowd.

Time to predict embarrassment.

Time to become afraid of an event that has not happened.

Then the ball comes.

A twelve-year-old stands at shortstop.

Routine ground ball.

He knows how to field it.

He has fielded thousands.

But maybe he made an error the inning before.

Now the next ball is not just a baseball.

It carries memory.

What if I boot this one too?

What if they score?

What if Coach takes me out?

What if everyone thinks I suck?

The ball has not reached him.

He is already in the future.

Fear does that.

It relocates us.

I tell players:

Present.

Patient.

Prepared.

Three words.

Simple.

Not easy.

The present is rarely frightening by itself.

A ground ball is a ground ball.

A pitch is a pitch.

Fear usually arrives attached to a story.

What might happen.

What it might mean.

What people might think.

What I might lose.

That story can be useful.

Human beings survived partly because we imagined danger before danger arrived.

But imagination does not know when to clock out.

It works overtime.

I have spent years thinking about what fear is asking from me.

My first instinct used to be straightforward.

If I'm afraid, something must be wrong.

Back away.

Prepare more.

Wait.

Gather more information.

Reconsider.

Sometimes excellent advice.

If the building is on fire, leave.

If the person is dangerous, protect yourself.

If the investment can ruin you, examine it carefully.

Fear has legitimate jurisdiction.

The mistake is giving it unlimited authority.

Because fear also appears when nothing dangerous is happening.

Only something unfamiliar.

That distinction took me too long to appreciate.

Unfamiliar feels dangerous because the nervous system prefers prediction.

The known misery can feel safer than the unknown possibility.

People remain in bad relationships.

Bad jobs.

Bad habits.

Bad identities.

Not because they enjoy suffering.

Because suffering with a map can feel less threatening than freedom without one.

I have done versions of that.

Everyone has routines they defend beyond usefulness.

Ways of thinking.

Ways of arguing.

Ways of coaching.

Ways of protecting themselves.

Then somebody or something challenges the pattern.

Fear arrives.

Maybe this is wrong.

Maybe I need to change.

Maybe the person I have been is no longer enough for where I want to go.

That is frightening because improvement contains a small death.

The old self loses territory.

We talk about growth as though it were a pleasant upward curve.

Growth.

Beautiful word.

Plants.

Sunlight.

Children getting taller.

But psychological growth can feel like demolition.

A belief has to come down.

An excuse loses its permit.

An identity gets evicted.

A relationship changes.

Something I relied on stops working.

Then I stand in the rubble and call it progress.

No wonder we resist.

Fear often appears there.

At the demolition site.

Not necessarily because I am moving in the wrong direction.

Because something familiar is disappearing.

That is why I have started thinking of fear as a boundary line.

Not always.

But often.

On this side:

the person I know how to be.

On the other:

some version of me I have not rehearsed yet.

Fear stands between them and says:

Are you sure?

Good question.

Maybe I should answer carefully.

But I should not automatically answer no.

This is where courage becomes misunderstood.

I used to think courage meant not being afraid.

That's nonsense.

At least in my experience.

The people who say they are never afraid either have a different nervous system than mine or a public relations department.

Courage seems more ordinary.

Fear arrives.

You notice it.

You decide whether it deserves obedience.

Sometimes yes.

Sometimes no.

That's it.

No music.

No speech.

No slow-motion scene.

Just a decision.

A hitter knows this.

Two strikes.

Good pitcher.

The body wants certainty.

Protect.

Don't strike out.

That instruction sounds reasonable.

Then fear shrinks the strike zone psychologically.

The hitter starts defending rather than competing.

He swings at pitches he should take.

Takes pitches he should attack.

His objective quietly changes.

Originally:

Hit the baseball.

Now:

Don't fail.

Those are different games.

I see that everywhere.

Don't fail.

Don't look stupid.

Don't lose money.

Don't get rejected.

Don't offend anyone.

Don't disappoint your parents.

Don't disappoint your children.

Don't disappoint yourself.

Don't make the wrong decision.

Fear converts life from pursuit into avoidance.

The goal stops being:

What do I want to move toward?

It becomes:

What pain am I trying not to feel?

That is a very different compass.

I have used that compass.

Maybe more than I knew.

There were times I thought I was being prudent when I was actually afraid.

Times I thought I was being patient when I was postponing.

Times I thought I needed more information when I needed courage.

Times I wanted one more conversation because the next action involved risk.

Fear is clever.

It rarely introduces itself honestly.

It doesn't always say:

I'm scared.

It says:

Let's think about this a little more.

Maybe tomorrow.

The timing isn't right.

You should prepare more.

What if?

Responsible language.

Protective language.

Sometimes correct.

Sometimes camouflage.

How do I know the difference?

I don't always.

That's the confession.

There is no internal alarm that says:

THIS FEAR IS WISE.

THIS FEAR IS COWARDICE.

I have to investigate.

What exactly am I afraid will happen?

That question alone exposes a lot.

Suppose I want to tell somebody the truth.

Why am I hesitating?

Maybe the truth will unnecessarily hurt them.

Good reason to think carefully.

Or maybe I am afraid they will think less of me.

Different issue.

Maybe I need to apologize.

Why am I afraid?

Perhaps the person is abusive and reopening contact would be harmful.

Important.

Or maybe I simply don't want to surrender the story where I was entirely right.

Different fear.

The sensation can feel similar.

The meaning isn't.

Fear requires specificity.

Vague fear grows.

Named fear shrinks.

Not disappears.

Shrinks.

"I'm afraid."

Of what?

"I'm afraid this won't work."

What does that mean?

"I'll lose money."

How much?

"I'll be embarrassed."

For how long?

"They'll think I'm stupid."

Who?

"People."

Which people?

Now we're getting somewhere.

Fear loves fog.

Questions turn on headlights.

I learned some of this in business.

Risk becomes terrifying when it is undefined.

You can imagine catastrophe without limit.

Then someone asks:

What is the actual downside?

Now fear has to produce numbers.

Maybe the downside is still unacceptable.

Fine.

Walk away.

But at least I am responding to risk rather than atmosphere.

The same process works emotionally.

What if they reject me?

Then what?

It will hurt.

Yes.

And?

That question can sound cold.

I don't mean it that way.

I mean:

What happens after the hurt?

Do I disappear?

Probably not.

Will I be embarrassed?

Maybe.

Can embarrassment be survived?

So far, yes.

Will my identity collapse?

It might feel like it.

But feelings are not always forecasts.

This is where insignificance helps me.

If I am spectacularly insignificant, perhaps embarrassment deserves a smaller chair.

I say the wrong thing.

Someone laughs.

Someone disagrees.

Someone thinks I'm foolish.

How long does the universe pause?

Not at all.

How long does the internet care?

Probably less than I imagine.

How long do most people think about my mistake?

They are busy thinking about theirs.

That realization is freeing.

I am not important enough to justify some of my fear.

Ego tells me everyone is watching.

Fear believes it.

Most people are not.

They are starring in their own movie.

I am background scenery in far more lives than my ego prefers to admit.

Wonderful.

Now I can move.

I think young people suffer unnecessarily from this.

They feel watched.

Judged.

Measured.

Maybe more than previous generations because some of the watching is real.

Phones.

Videos.

Social media.

Statistics.

Rankings.

Recruiting pages.

Everything can become permanent enough to feel dangerous.

A bad game once disappeared into memory.

Now somebody may upload it.

The pressure is different.

I don't want to dismiss that.

But the basic fear is ancient.

What will the tribe think if I fail?

A kid at the plate is not only facing a pitcher.

He may be facing his imagined audience.

Coach.

Parents.

Teammates.

Scouts.

Instagram.

Future self.

That is too many defenders.

The pitcher already has eight.

No need to add six more.

This is why I tell players that the quiet unseen moments matter.

Not because invisible work guarantees success.

Chapter Seven destroyed that contract.

The quiet unseen moments matter because they help establish a relationship with oneself that can survive public outcomes.

If I know I prepared honestly, then failure still hurts.

But maybe it doesn't require a trial about my worth.

I struck out.

Okay.

Did I prepare?

Did I compete?

Did I see the ball?

Did I learn anything?

Then get another at-bat.

Fear wants the strikeout to become identity.

Self-confrontation keeps it specific.

Adults need this too.

We make mistakes and attach nouns.

Failure.

Fraud.

Loser.

Bad parent.

Bad husband.

Bad coach.

Bad person.

Fear loves permanent nouns.

They make retreat seem reasonable.

Why try again if the verdict has already been issued?

Maybe that's why language matters so much.

"I failed at this" is not the same as "I am a failure."

One describes an event.

The other colonizes identity.

I have had moments when fear became anger.

That's common.

Anger feels stronger.

Fear feels exposed.

So the conversion happens quickly.

Someone questions me.

I feel threatened.

Before I can identify the threat, I'm irritated.

Now I get to feel powerful.

Convenient.

The fear disappears behind volume.

I have done that.

Maybe every man who grew up learning that fear should remain hidden has done some version of it.

This is one of the places masculinity becomes complicated for me.

I don't want men terrified of strength.

Strength matters.

Physical strength.

Emotional strength.

The ability to protect.

Endure.

Act.

Take responsibility.

All valuable.

But if strength requires hiding fear, then fear simply goes underground.

Underground fear becomes dangerous.

It finds another exit.

Control.

Anger.

Alcohol.

Work.

Silence.

Cruelty.

Risk-taking.

Whatever keeps the original feeling unnamed.

Maybe real strength includes the ability to say:

I'm afraid.

Then remain standing.

That seems harder.

Not announcing fear for applause.

Not making vulnerability another performance.

Just recognizing reality.

My body is afraid.

Okay.

What now?

There is that question again.

What now?

It might be the governing question of this entire book.

Something happened.

What now?

I'm afraid.

What now?

I failed.

What now?

I was wrong.

What now?

I lost someone.

What now?

The universe is indifferent.

What now?

The question returns agency without promising control.

I like that.

Fear also appears when we approach things we genuinely want.

That confused me for years.

If I want it, why am I afraid?

Because desire creates stakes.

The thing I don't care about cannot reject me.

The work I never publish cannot be criticized.

The business I never start cannot fail.

The person I never love cannot leave.

The team I don't care about cannot disappoint me.

Indifference is safe.

Dead safe.

Caring opens the door to fear.

That is the price.

The alternative is not fearlessness.

It is smaller attachment.

Smaller life.

I don't want that bargain.

I think about writing this book.

There is fear in it.

What if it sounds self-important?

Possible.

What if I contradict myself?

Certain.

What if people who know me read a chapter about humility and remember a moment when I behaved arrogantly?

They should.

What if someone says:

Jose, you don't live this stuff.

That one matters.

Because sometimes I don't.

That is precisely why I am writing confessions instead of commandments.

I am not documenting mastery.

I am documenting the fight.

The fear of hypocrisy can become another excuse.

If I have not perfected the principle, do I have the right to write about it?

If that were the rule, silence would become humanity's primary literary genre.

The better question is whether I am pretending to have arrived.

I am not.

At least I hope I'm not.

This book is not:

Follow me.

It is:

Look at what I keep catching myself doing.

Maybe you'll recognize something.

Maybe not.

Still, publishing creates exposure.

Once the words leave me, I lose control.

Someone can misunderstand.

Criticize.

Mock.

Ignore.

Maybe ignoring is the one ego fears most.

Criticism at least confirms existence.

Silence is brutal.

You put something into the world.

Nothing.

No applause.

No hostility.

Just indifference.

Chapter Seven again.

Maybe the universe is training me.

That fear is worth approaching.

Because I want the work to exist more than I want protection from reaction.

That may be one way to identify useful fear.

What sits behind it?

Something meaningful?

Growth?

Truth?

A necessary boundary?

A difficult conversation?

A creation?

A decision?

Maybe fear is not blocking the path.

Maybe fear is standing beside the sign pointing toward it.

This is not always true.

I need to keep saying that.

Fear is sometimes screaming:

Don't walk down that alley.

Listen.

Don't get in the car with that person.

Listen.

Don't make the investment you cannot understand.

Listen.

Don't ignore the pain in your chest.

Listen.

Fear has earned respect.

It just hasn't earned worship.

I want a relationship with fear, not a war.

If I make fear the enemy, I become afraid of being afraid.

Now I have two problems.

Fear arrives.

Then shame arrives.

Why am I scared?

I shouldn't be scared.

What's wrong with me?

Now the original fear has company.

Better:

Fear is here.

Why?

What does it know?

What does it imagine?

What evidence exists?

What value is at stake?

What action remains available?

That feels more useful.

I tell young players not to run from nerves.

Nerves mean something matters.

Maybe that framing is imperfect, but I like it.

The first game.

Big tournament.

Important at-bat.

Of course your heart is moving.

You're alive.

You're invested.

Use it.

Don't demand a body without adrenaline.

Learn how to perform with adrenaline.

That's a much more realistic skill.

We spend too much time trying to remove uncomfortable feelings before action.

I'll do it when I feel confident.

I'll speak when I am no longer nervous.

I'll start when I'm ready.

What if readiness often arrives after movement?

A player does not wait to become fearless before stepping into the box.

He steps in.

The body learns:

I survived the box.

Then maybe confidence grows.

Action teaches the nervous system what philosophy cannot.

That's why avoidance is powerful.

Every time I retreat, fear learns:

Good call.

That thing was dangerous.

We escaped.

Fear gets reinforced.

Then the boundary moves inward.

Smaller world.

Another retreat.

Smaller still.

Eventually safety becomes a cage built one reasonable avoidance at a time.

I've seen adults do this.

I've done milder versions.

Don't go there.

Don't say that.

Don't ask.

Don't risk.

Don't change.

Don't start.

Don't fail.

Soon you have constructed a life that protects you beautifully from everything except living.

But recklessness is not courage.

I need that sentence too.

There is ego available in risk.

Look how fearless I am.

Drive faster.

Bet bigger.

Fight unnecessarily.

Ignore consequences.

That's not the courage I'm interested in.

Anyone can confuse adrenaline with bravery.

The courage I admire is often boring.

Make the appointment.

Have the conversation.

Set the boundary.

Ask the question.

Say you're sorry.

Send the work.

Leave the job responsibly.

Tell someone you love them.

Tell someone no.

Admit you don't know.

Those acts rarely make movies.

They make lives.

There is also fear in aging.

The body changes.

Time becomes visible.

When you're young, the future feels large enough to hide mortality.

Later the calendar begins talking differently.

There are fewer assumptions.

More calculations.

How many summers?

How many seasons coaching?

How many years with my mother?

How many healthy years with my wife?

How long before my daughter has a family or life so full that my role changes again?

These questions can create urgency.

Urgency can become fear.

Fear can make you clutch.

That is the opposite of what I want.

I don't want mortality to turn love into possession.

If time is limited, the instinct may be:

Hold tighter.

Maybe wisdom says:

Pay better attention.

Different response.

One controls.

The other witnesses.

I think the boundary line of my next self now looks different than it did when I was twenty.

At twenty, courage might have meant taking physical risks.

Competing.

Proving.

Pushing.

At this age, courage may mean surrendering certain identities.

Coach who knows.

Father who fixes.

Man who provides answers.

Person who needs to be useful.

Maybe the next self is less impressive.

That scares the ego.

Good.

Maybe that's the direction.

There will come a time when I cannot do what I do now.

No philosophy prevents that.

The body will eventually negotiate terms I don't like.

Maybe I coach less.

Move slower.

Forget something.

Need help.

Dependency frightens me.

I suspect it frightens many people who built identities around independence.

What then?

Will I interpret needing help as weakness?

Or will I have enough humility to receive what I once enjoyed giving?

That could be one of the final forms of courage.

Fear asks:

Who are you if you can't do what made you feel like you?

I don't know.

Maybe that's precisely the border.

Nietzsche's will to power interests me here.

Not domination.

Becoming.

The willingness to overcome the inherited version of myself.

But even that language can become dangerous.

Overcome.

Master.

Conquer.

Those words appeal to me.

Maybe too much.

There are parts of existence I will not conquer.

Aging.

Death.

Loss.

Uncertainty.

The will to power may sometimes mean accepting powerlessness without collapsing.

That is a paradox worth carrying.

Can I be powerful enough to admit what I cannot control?

Can I be brave enough to feel fear without obeying it automatically?

Can I be disciplined enough to move while uncertain?

Can I be humble enough to retreat when fear is actually warning me?

That is harder than slogans.

Fearless.

No fear.

Fuck fear.

I don't believe any of that.

Fear belongs here.

It earned a chair.

Just not the head of the table.

So here is Confession Number Eight.

I have avoided things because I was scared.

I have called fear prudence.

I have called fear patience.

I have called fear preparation.

I have turned fear into anger because anger protected my self-image.

I have occasionally confused recklessness with courage.

And I have waited to feel ready when movement itself was the thing that might have made me ready.

I am trying to change that relationship.

Not eliminate fear.

Listen to it.

Question it.

Respect it.

Then decide.

When fear appears now, I want to ask:

Is there danger here?

If yes, what kind?

Physical?

Financial?

Emotional?

Social?

Imagined?

How likely?

How costly?

What can be mitigated?

What cannot?

And then:

If I knew I could tolerate the discomfort, what would I do?

That question is interesting.

Because often the thing I fear most is not catastrophe.

It is feeling.

Embarrassment.

Rejection.

Uncertainty.

Grief.

Shame.

Loss of control.

Maybe I can survive more feeling than fear gives me credit for.

A hitter cannot demand certainty before the pitch.

He gets ready.

He watches.

He decides.

Sometimes he swings and misses.

Fine.

Stay in the box.

That may be the whole chapter.

Stay in the box.

Not forever.

Not when staying becomes stupidity.

But when the only thing chasing me out is the sensation of fear, maybe remain for one more pitch.

See what happens.

I don't know who my next self is.

That is probably why he scares me.

The current one is familiar.

I know his explanations.

His routines.

His defenses.

His strengths.

His bullshit.

The next one exists only as possibility.

Maybe better.

Maybe not.

There is no guarantee.

Chapter Seven already handled guarantees.

So fear stands at the line.

Behind me, the known.

Ahead, uncertainty.

I feel the body tighten.

Good.

I'm alive.

Now the question is not:

How do I make the fear disappear?

The question is:

What is fear preventing me from discovering?

Sometimes the answer will be:

Nothing worth discovering.

Walk away.

Other times the answer may be:

Your next self.

And on those days, I hope I have enough courage to cross the line.

NINE: I AM SPECTACULARLY INSIGNIFICANT

Confession #9: The Realization That I Am Not the Center of Anything May Be the Closest Thing I Have Found to Freedom

I have spent enough of my life wanting to matter that insignificance should probably insult me.

Instead, it has started to feel like oxygen.

That surprises me.

Because ego does not enjoy shrinking.

Ego likes scale.

Recognition.

Importance.

Legacy.

Impact.

Being remembered.

Being right.

Being needed.

Being missed.

Being the person somebody calls.

Being the coach whose words stayed with the player.

Being the father whose advice mattered.

Being the writer whose sentence gets repeated.

Being the husband whose presence changes the room.

Being the man whose life added up to something visible.

I understand that hunger.

I carry it.

But the older I get, the more I suspect that one of the greatest sources of anxiety in my life has been the belief that I was supposed to be more important than I actually am.

That sentence should probably hurt.

It doesn't.

Not the way it used to.

Because maybe I am not supposed to be important.

Maybe I am simply supposed to be present.

Those are different ambitions.

There are billions of people alive right now.

Most do not know my name.

Most never will.

Most would walk past me on the street without recognizing anything more significant than another man moving through the day.

That is objectively accurate.

My ego would like to file an appeal.

On what grounds?

I coached baseball.

I wrote some things.

I loved some people.

I made some mistakes.

I thought deeply about a few subjects.

Wonderful.

So did millions of people.

The world does not owe me a monument for participation.

That sounds harsh only if existence is supposed to be a competition for significance.

I am less convinced that it is.

When I was younger, importance felt connected to achievement.

Do something.

Become something.

Get somewhere.

Win.

Build.

Prove.

I do not reject ambition.

Ambition has carried me through difficult things.

It has created discipline.

Curiosity.

Movement.

But ambition can quietly mutate.

At first:

I want to do something meaningful.

Then:

I want people to recognize that I did something meaningful.

Then:

I need recognition to confirm that it was meaningful.

Now the original act has been outsourced.

I no longer know whether it mattered until someone else applauds.

That is a dangerous dependency.

Baseball helped teach me this.

A coach can feel very important.

People ask questions.

Players look toward the dugout.

Parents want answers.

You decide the lineup.

You call the pitches.

You correct mechanics.

You give speeches.

You influence playing time.

Authority creates an optical illusion.

Everyone is looking at you, so you start thinking everything is about you.

It isn't.

The game was there before I arrived.

It will be there after I leave.

The kids eventually become adults.

Most will forget individual practices.

Some will forget entire seasons.

They may remember one sentence.

Or one look.

Or one mistake I made.

Or nothing.

That does not mean the work had no value.

It means I do not control the archive.

There is humility in being temporary.

At first I resisted that.

Temporary sounds small.

Disposable.

Replaceable.

But maybe replaceability is not an insult.

If I leave a baseball program and someone else coaches, baseball continues.

Good.

If my daughter becomes fully independent and needs less from me, life continues.

Good.

If someone else can help a person better than I can, good.

Why should usefulness require exclusivity?

Because ego wants proprietary rights.

It doesn't merely want to help.

It wants to be the helper.

That is a subtle difference.

I have felt it.

A player asks another coach for advice.

Why should that bother me?

If the advice is good, it should not.

But sometimes a small voice asks:

Why didn't he ask me?

There.

That is the ego in work clothes.

It can pretend to care about development while secretly monitoring relevance.

I want the kid to get better.

And I want to matter in the getting better.

Both can be true.

The work is knowing which voice is driving.

Fatherhood exposes the same thing.

When children are young, you are enormous.

You provide almost everything.

Food.

Transportation.

Protection.

Answers.

Money.

Permission.

Comfort.

The architecture of the child's world includes you everywhere.

Then the scale shifts.

Friends matter more.

Teachers.

Colleagues.

Partners.

Work.

Their own judgment.

Their own mistakes.

Their own private interior life.

A healthy child becomes a world you cannot fully access.

That is success.

It can also feel like demotion.

I do not think parents speak enough about that.

We celebrate independence in theory.

Then independence arrives and takes some of our authority with it.

Now what?

Do I continue forcing relevance?

Advice.

Questions.

Warnings.

Checking in.

Intervening.

Sometimes appropriate.

Sometimes not.

The difficulty is telling the difference between caring and resisting insignificance.

That one hurts.

Because love can make control look noble.

Maybe one of the hardest sentences for a parent is:

This is not about me.

The child's career.

Not about me.

Her relationships.

Not about me.

Her success.

Not about me.

Her mistakes.

Not about me.

Even the lessons I taught her eventually stop belonging to me.

If she uses them, they become hers.

That should be the goal.

But ego likes royalties.

I think coaching and parenting overlap there.

The best evidence that I taught someone well may be that eventually they do not need me.

Terrible business model.

Beautiful human model.

Insignificance also changes embarrassment.

I wish I had learned that younger.

How many things did I worry about that no one else remembers?

A bad game.

A stupid comment.

An awkward moment.

A mistake.

A failed attempt.

At the time, the event felt enormous.

My mind projected an audience.

Everyone saw.

Everyone knows.

Everyone is thinking about it.

Most people were thinking about themselves.

Of course they were.

Just as I was thinking about myself.

That is one of the funniest things about human insecurity.

Millions of people walking around believing everyone else is focused on them while everyone else is mostly focused on themselves.

A planet full of imagined spotlights.

If I could go back and tell my younger self one thing, maybe it would be:

Relax. You're not that important.

He might misunderstand.

He might think I was insulting him.

I would mean it as mercy.

That girl who rejected you?

Life continues.

That coach who underestimated you?

Life continues.

That person who thinks you're stupid?

Life continues.

That failure?

Life continues.

You do not have to win every courtroom inside every other person's head.

They are not even in session most of the time.

Insignificance can dissolve an enormous amount of vanity if I let it.

Do I need the last word?

Why?

Do I need credit?

Always?

Do I need somebody to understand my intentions perfectly?

Impossible.

Do I need to correct every misunderstanding?

Exhausting.

Do I need everyone to know what I contributed?

For what?

Sometimes credit matters.

Workplaces require accountability.

History should identify contribution.

People should not steal labor.

I am not romanticizing invisibility.

But there is a difference between legitimate recognition and emotional dependence on being recognized.

I know both.

I have also used significance as a defense against mortality.

Legacy.

That is the respectable word.

What will remain?

Books.

Ideas.

Family.

Stories.

Maybe.

I like the idea of leaving something useful.

But legacy can become another negotiation with death.

If they remember me, perhaps I am not completely gone.

I understand that emotionally.

But memory is fragile.

Names disappear.

Stories change.

Books go unread.

Websites vanish.

Buildings come down.

Even famous people eventually become paragraphs.

Then footnotes.

Then nothing.

That sounds bleak only if permanence was the requirement.

Why should it be?

A meal does not have to last forever to nourish someone.

A joke does not have to be remembered forever to make someone laugh.

A practice does not have to become legendary to help a kid improve.

A conversation can matter for ten minutes.

A kindness can matter for one afternoon.

Maybe significance does not require duration.

Maybe that was another category error.

I think this is where the universe's indifference from the previous chapters becomes unexpectedly gentle.

If the universe is not keeping score, perhaps I can stop performing for the universe.

No cosmic résumé.

No final ranking.

No universal audience.

What remains?

People.

Moments.

Choices.

Attention.

That is more manageable.

I do not have to solve humanity.

Good.

I was not going to.

I do not have to fix baseball.

Good.

Baseball never requested salvation.

I do not have to make everyone think more critically.

Impossible.

I do not have to convince every reader.

I do not have to leave a permanent mark.

I do not even have to become the best possible version of myself.

That phrase has started bothering me.

Best possible version?

According to what model?

Compared to which hypothetical?

Maybe I just need to become slightly less full of shit tomorrow.

That seems measurable.

There is freedom in reducing scale.

Not lowering standards.

Reducing scale.

Today.

This conversation.

This decision.

This person.

This practice.

This at-bat.

Can I be present here?

That is a smaller question than:

What is my purpose?

Maybe smaller questions are sometimes more useful.

Purpose has become another intimidating word.

People talk about finding your purpose as though there is one hidden assignment somewhere.

If you do not discover it, you failed the scavenger hunt.

I do not know whether I have one purpose.

Maybe I have responsibilities.

Interests.

Relationships.

Moments where I can be useful.

Maybe purpose emerges afterward from a pattern we could not see while living it.

I am increasingly comfortable with that.

The pressure to be extraordinary is strange.

We tell children:

You can be anything.

Sometimes they hear:

You better become something impressive.

We celebrate exceptional people.

Athletes.

Entrepreneurs.

Artists.

Leaders.

Then ordinary life begins to look like underachievement.

But most human life is ordinary.

Meals.

Work.

Commuting.

Cleaning.

Talking.

Waiting.

Helping.

Sleeping.

If meaning exists only in extraordinary moments, most of existence becomes filler.

I reject that.

Or I am trying to.

I have watched enough baseball to know championships occupy very little calendar space.

The season is mostly practice.

Travel.

Rain delays.

Ground balls.

Pitching drills.

Waiting for fields.

Parents looking for parking.

Kids asking what time the game starts.

The championship photo might become the image everyone remembers.

But the actual life was everything around it.

Maybe life works the same way.

We curate highlights and live in between them.

The in-between is not waiting for life.

It is life.

Insignificance also helps me with comparison.

Comparison requires scale.

Better than him.

More successful than her.

More money.

More recognition.

More influence.

Better coach.

Better parent.

Better thinker.

What happens when I refuse the competition?

Not because excellence is meaningless.

Because someone else existing at a higher level does not necessarily reduce anything in me.

A better coach can teach me.

A more successful writer does not remove words from my keyboard.

Someone else's child succeeding does not diminish mine.

Someone having more money does not alter the food on my table unless I convert the difference into meaning.

I have done that.

Most people have.

Status is one of the weirdest human inventions.

It is partly real.

Status changes access.

Opportunity.

Influence.

Safety.

I am not denying social reality.

But internally we turn status into worth.

That is where things get dangerous.

The person with more is more.

The person with less is less.

Now possessions become metaphysics.

A bank balance starts answering:

Who am I?

It is a terrible philosopher.

I have thought about money increasingly as I age.

Money matters.

Security matters.

Debt matters.

Savings matter.

I am not interested in spiritual clichés that pretend otherwise.

Financial insecurity is real.

But beyond a certain point, money and fear begin having conversations that mathematics cannot settle.

Enough.

When is enough?

The number changes because anxiety is allowed to vote.

Insignificance may help there too.

What exactly am I trying to prove?

Who am I competing with?

What lifestyle is actually mine?

If no one could see the purchase, would I still want it?

That question can save money.

And embarrassment.

I think about cars that way.

Homes.

Clothes.

Restaurants.

Anything visible.

Would I still want this if nobody knew I had it?

Sometimes yes.

Great.

Enjoy it.

Sometimes the answer gets murkier.

That is useful information.

Not condemnation.

I like nice things.

There.

Simple truth.

The point is not pretending appetite does not exist.

The point is knowing when appetite has recruited an audience.

The same test applies to writing.

Would I still write if no one read it?

Hard question.

I think yes.

I have written things primarily to clarify myself.

But would I publish if no one cared?

Maybe not.

Publishing is relational.

You want a reader.

That is okay.

Selflessness does not require pretending I have no desire for connection.

The danger is when readership becomes proof of value.

One person reads.

Meaningful?

Ten thousand?

More meaningful?

Maybe commercially.

Not necessarily existentially.

A sentence can help one person.

That counts.

How much?

I don't know.

Why quantify everything?

I think insignificance also creates tolerance for being misunderstood.

Not infinite tolerance.

Some misunderstandings matter.

Legal matters.

Relationships.

Reputation.

But not every inaccurate interpretation deserves a campaign.

Someone thinks I am arrogant.

Maybe I was.

Maybe they misunderstood.

Maybe both.

Do I need to fix their view?

Sometimes.

Often no.

Their interpretation belongs partly to them.

I cannot live as a full-time public relations firm for Jose Franco.

That sounds exhausting.

I have other things to do.

There is another side to insignificance that I have to watch.

False humility.

I am nobody.

Nothing matters.

Who cares?

That is not freedom.

That can become avoidance.

Insignificance does not eliminate responsibility.

Quite the opposite.

If I am not cosmically important, then local consequences become more important.

I may not matter to the universe.

I matter to the person I hurt.

I matter to the child depending on me.

I matter to my wife.

I matter to my daughter.

I matter to the player looking at me after an error.

Small radius.

Real impact.

That is enough responsibility for one man.

Maybe there are two kinds of significance.

Vertical significance:

How high do I rank?

How widely am I known?

How large is my influence?

Then horizontal significance:

Who is affected by the way I move through today?

I am less interested in vertical significance now.

Horizontal significance feels more honest.

The person next to me.

The room I'm in.

The promise I made.

The mistake I need to repair.

No monument required.

The paradox is that accepting insignificance might make me more responsible.

If I stop performing history, I can pay attention to the present.

I don't need a legacy speech.

I need to listen.

I don't need to become an important coach.

I need to see the kid standing in front of me.

I don't need to be remembered as a good father.

I need to behave like one today.

The future biography can take care of itself.

Or disappear.

Either way.

This is difficult for ego because ego loves abstraction.

Legacy.

Reputation.

Impact.

Those are large mirrors.

The present is smaller.

Did I interrupt her?

Did I listen?

Did I show up on time?

Did I keep my word?

Did I humiliate the kid?

Did I apologize?

Did I spend responsibly?

Did I call my mother?

Very inconvenient.

No grand theory.

Just behavior.

Maybe insignificance strips away one more sophisticated excuse.

I cannot keep saying I care about humanity while being careless with humans.

Humanity is an abstraction.

The person in front of me is not.

It is easier to love humanity.

Humanity never interrupts me.

Never drives too slowly.

Never asks the same question twice.

Never disagrees at dinner.

Individual humans are much harder.

That is probably why they are the better test.

I have noticed that people who talk constantly about changing the world can sometimes become unbearable at home.

I am not excluding myself from the risk.

Big missions can excuse small cruelties.

I am doing important work.

Therefore you should tolerate me.

Dangerous.

If my vision for a better world requires everyone nearby to absorb my impatience, perhaps the revolution can wait.

The baseball field corrects ego quickly.

A coach gives a beautiful pregame speech.

Players run onto the field.

First pitch.

Walk.

Next batter.

Error.

Speech gone.

The game does not care.

I love that.

Reality has a sense of humor.

You can spend twenty minutes explaining mental toughness and then watch a twelve-year-old ask whether there are snacks.

Good.

Perspective restored.

Kids are useful that way.

Adults construct identity.

Children puncture it.

You think you're delivering wisdom.

A kid is looking at a cloud.

Wonderful.

Maybe the cloud was more interesting.

Insignificance lets me laugh at myself.

That may be one of its best gifts.

Self-confrontation without humor becomes narcissism with better vocabulary.

If every flaw becomes a dramatic excavation, I have once again made myself the center.

Sometimes I am not confronting an existential crisis.

Sometimes I was just being a jerk.

Apologize.

Move on.

No orchestral score.

Humor reduces ego's oxygen supply.

I like that.

The man obsessed with his importance cannot laugh when the universe knocks his hat off.

I want to laugh more.

Especially at Jose.

He gives me plenty of material.

I think this realization has also changed my relationship with age.

There was a period where age felt like accumulation.

More knowledge.

More experience.

More responsibility.

Now age increasingly involves subtraction.

Roles change.

Parents die.

Children leave.

Body changes.

Professional relevance eventually declines.

Possessions get reduced.

A future once expanding begins narrowing.

That can feel threatening if identity depends on accumulation.

Maybe insignificance makes subtraction less frightening.

If I was never the center, moving toward the edge is not defeat.

It is nature.

One day somebody younger will know more about baseball's current technology than I do.

Probably already true.

Someone will have newer ideas.

Different methods.

Players may respond better to them.

Good.

If I need to remain the authority forever, I become the obstacle I once criticized.

I do not want that.

I want enough ego to contribute and enough insignificance to move aside when appropriate.

That balance will probably be difficult.

Most worthwhile balances are.

There is a sentence I increasingly like:

This can continue without me.

A team.

A business.

A family tradition.

A podcast.

A conversation.

The world.

At first that sounds depressing.

Then:

Thank God.

Imagine the burden if everything depended on me.

What an absurd job description.

People sometimes say:

"No one is irreplaceable."

That sounds corporate and cold.

But humanly, the truth is more nuanced.

Roles are replaceable.

People are not.

Another coach can take my position.

He cannot become me to the people who love me.

Another husband is not a replacement for a dead husband.

Another child does not replace a child.

Specific relationships are singular.

Functions can continue.

Both truths matter.

This is where insignificance and love meet.

Cosmically replaceable.

Relationally unique.

That feels about right.

I do not need the world to need me.

A few people loving me is plenty.

Even that is not guaranteed forever.

Relationships change.

People die.

Memory fades.

Again, no permanence.

Maybe love is meaningful precisely because it is not a contract with eternity.

It is attention given under conditions of impermanence.

That sounds more courageous than legacy.

I have wondered whether embracing insignificance might reduce ambition too much.

Could it become an excuse not to strive?

Why work hard if none of this matters?

But that question assumes striving needs cosmic reward.

I play baseball because I love baseball.

I coach because I value the work.

I write because writing clarifies something.

I help because another person exists.

These reasons may be enough.

A flower does not require immortality to bloom.

I know that sounds dangerously poetic for someone who keeps criticizing jargon.

But sometimes the simple metaphor works.

The point is not:

Nothing matters.

The point is:

Everything does not have to matter forever to matter now.

That distinction saves the chapter.

Maybe it saves me too.

I think of my mother aging.

Time becomes visible there.

Conversations matter differently when you know the number remaining is finite, even if you do not know the number.

I cannot preserve her forever.

I cannot make myself forever significant to her because neither of us owns forever.

But I can be there.

Call.

Listen.

Repeat a story.

Hear the same detail again.

Maybe presence is the only legacy available in real time.

Everything else comes later.

I think of my father.

His cosmic footprint is tiny.

So is mine.

But his absence has weight in me.

That is enough to show how significance really works.

Not universal.

Relational.

He mattered because he was mine.

Not because history wrote his name.

That seems more beautiful anyway.

Maybe I have spent too much time thinking significance had to be externally validated.

The newspaper.

The statistics.

The money.

The audience.

The trophy.

The title.

But a person can be historically invisible and emotionally enormous.

Most parents are.

Most grandparents.

Most coaches.

Most neighbors.

Most people.

Civilization has been built mostly by human beings whose names we will never know.

That should correct our definition of importance.

The street I grew up on contained whole worlds.

People whose names will not appear in books.

Men going to work.

Women holding families together.

People making mistakes.

People helping one another.

People failing one another.

Kids becoming adults.

Deaths.

Births.

Arguments.

Laughter.

That life did not become meaningless because history failed to document it.

Maybe history is not the judge of meaning.

Good.

History has terrible filing systems.

That is why I no longer need this book to become important.

I want it to be useful.

Different goal.

If it disappears, it disappears.

If someone reads it and thinks differently for ten minutes, fine.

If no one does, I still had to write some of these sentences because they confronted me.

Maybe the first reader was always me.

That is enough to justify paper.

Still, I know the ego will visit publication day.

How many copies?

Who responded?

Did anyone mention it?

Of course.

I am not pretending transcendence.

I know Jose.

He will check.

He will care.

He may refresh something twice.

Maybe three times.

Then I hope another voice says:

Relax.

You are spectacularly insignificant.

Go take a walk.

That would be progress.

The phrase **spectacularly insignificant** sounds contradictory.

I like it for that reason.

Spectacular because existence itself is astonishing.

Insignificant because existence does not make me central.

Both.

I am one person among billions.

And there has never been this exact person before.

No contradiction.

Scale changes the answer.

From far away:

nothing remarkable.

From close up:

an entire universe of memory, fear, love, regret, language, family, baseball, streets, mistakes, and hope.

Every person contains that paradox.

That should make arrogance difficult.

It should also make contempt difficult.

The stranger I barely notice is the center of an interior world as complicated as mine.

That thought humbles me more than any sermon.

Insignificance is not humiliation.

Humiliation says:

You are less than others.

Insignificance says:

No one is the center.

Big difference.

There is equality in that.

The billionaire.

The president.

The celebrity.

The coach.

The kid sitting at the end of the bench.

All enormous from inside themselves.

All tiny from far enough away.

Maybe perspective is simply learning to change distances.

When ego becomes too large, zoom out.

When despair makes life feel meaningless, zoom in.

I like that.

Zoom out:

Your embarrassment is tiny.

Zoom in:

The person you hurt matters.

Zoom out:

Your career is one brief event.

Zoom in:

Today's work deserves attention.

Zoom out:

You will disappear.

Zoom in:

You are here.

That might be the most useful mental exercise in this book.

Distance.

Then proximity.

Both.

So here is Confession Number Nine.

I have wanted to matter.

I still do.

I have wanted recognition.

I still do.

I have sometimes confused being needed with being loved.

I have confused influence with meaning.

I have confused permanence with value.

I have acted as though other people's opinions were conducting a referendum on my worth.

And I have wasted emotional energy defending an importance I never possessed.

I am trying to release some of that.

Not all at once.

The ego has tenure.

But enough.

I want to matter less in my imagination and more in my behavior.

Less:

What will they think of me?

More:

What does this moment require?

Less:

Will they remember me?

More:

Did I pay attention while they were here?

Less:

What is my legacy?

More:

Did I love well today?

Less:

Am I important?

More:

Am I useful?

Those questions feel cleaner.

One day the baseball field will exist without me.

A coach will stand where I stood.

Some kid will boot a ground ball.

Some parent will complain about a call.

Someone will yell:

"Throw strikes."

Life will continue.

I love that.

Not because my time there meant nothing.

Because meaning never required ownership.

I got to participate.

For a while.

That is enough.

One day my daughter will tell stories about a version of me that I cannot edit.

That is frightening.

Also fair.

One day, perhaps, she will remember things I thought were insignificant and forget things I thought mattered.

That is hers.

I do not own my place in another person's memory.

I only own, imperfectly, how I behave before memory takes over.

Maybe that is freedom.

Not disappearing.

Not becoming detached.

Not pretending I don't care.

Freedom from the impossible job of being important all the time.

Freedom from proving.

Freedom from performing permanence.

Freedom to be one human being in one short life doing the next thing as honestly as possible.

Spectacularly insignificant.

Temporarily here.

Deeply connected.

Completely replaceable in some ways.

Irreplaceable in others.

Trying.

Failing.

Laughing.

Correcting.

Loving.

Then gone.

I used to think that sounded small.

Now it sounds enormous enough.

TEN: THE WORLD IS NOT JUST

Confession #10: Good Intentions Protect No One from Catastrophe

I have wanted justice to be more than a human aspiration.

I have wanted it to be built into the structure of reality.

A hidden balancing mechanism.

Something almost physical.

Do good.

Receive good.

Work hard.

Eventually be rewarded.

Hurt people.

Eventually pay.

Love well.

Be loved back.

Protect others.

Be protected.

I know better.

But some part of me still wants the universe to keep books.

Credits.

Debits.

A moral ledger.

A final reconciliation.

The good man suffered?

Something will make that suffering meaningful.

The cruel man prospered?

Wait.

His bill is coming.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

That is the confession.

The world is not just simply because I need justice to exist.

Justice is something human beings attempt.

Sometimes beautifully.

Sometimes badly.

Sometimes hypocritically.

Sometimes courageously.

The universe itself offers no guarantee.

That fact can make a person bitter.

Or serious.

I am trying to choose serious.

Children understand injustice almost immediately.

"That's not fair."

Every parent has heard it.

Every coach.

Every teacher.

The child does not need John Rawls.

Does not need Aristotle.

Does not need a law degree.

He knows.

Or believes he knows.

He got more.

I was first.

She cheated.

He didn't get punished.

You let him do it.

Why does he get to start?

Why am I sitting?

That's not fair.

We smile sometimes because the dispute seems small.

Two cookies.

Playing time.

Who gets the front seat.

But the sentence contains something enormous.

The world should correspond to my sense of what is deserved.

Adults spend entire civilizations arguing about that.

We just use longer sentences.

Baseball is wonderfully unfair.

Not intentionally unfair.

That distinction matters.

A line drive is caught.

A broken-bat blooper falls.

An umpire misses a pitch.

The sun gets in someone's eyes.

A perfect throw hits a runner.

An injured player loses a season.

A weaker team catches the stronger team on one bad afternoon.

Nobody hands the trophy to the team that "deserved" it based on effort.

There is a score.

That score tells you who won.

It does not tell you who deserved what.

Those are different questions.

I wish adults remembered that outside sports.

There is a dangerous habit in human thinking:

We confuse outcome with virtue.

The winner must have done something right.

The loser must have done something wrong.

Sometimes.

Not always.

Success attracts mythology.

The successful businessman becomes disciplined.

Visionary.

Brave.

We examine his habits.

Wake up at five.

Read every morning.

Takes cold showers.

Wonderful.

What about the other thousand people who woke up at five, read every morning, took cold showers, worked hard, took intelligent risks, and failed?

We don't interview them.

Survivorship bias has excellent public relations.

The reverse is equally dangerous.

Someone is struggling financially.

Irresponsible.

Someone is homeless.

Bad decisions.

Someone is sick.

Didn't take care of themselves.

Someone's child is struggling.

Bad parenting.

Maybe.

Sometimes.

But causal stories become moral stories very quickly.

Why?

Because randomness terrifies us.

If I can identify what the person did wrong, I can reassure myself:

I don't do that.

Therefore:

That won't happen to me.

Judgment becomes anxiety medication.

I've taken that medication.

It is psychologically easier to believe every tragedy contains a preventable mistake.

Because then tragedy becomes avoidable.

If I am disciplined enough.

Careful enough.

Smart enough.

Virtuous enough.

I will be safe.

Chapter Seven already exposed that bargain.

It does not exist.

But unfairness creates an even harder realization.

Some people will suffer through no moral failure of their own.

Some people will benefit through no moral accomplishment of their own.

That disrupts the comforting equation.

I grew up aware of inequality before I had economic vocabulary for it.

Kids notice.

Who has what.

Who wears what.

Who lives where.

Whose parents own a car.

Whose don't.

Who goes on vacation.

Who has new sneakers.

Who is pretending not to care that he doesn't.

No child created those conditions.

You arrive.

Here.

This family.

This block.

This body.

This set of circumstances.

Deal the cards.

Play.

Later I would learn sophisticated words.

Structural.

Institutional.

Intergenerational.

Capital.

Mobility.

Opportunity.

All useful.

But the first lesson was simpler:

People do not start in the same place.

That is obvious.

What becomes difficult is deciding what that fact requires of us.

Some people hear inequality and immediately hear injustice.

Others hear inequality and immediately hear difference.

The distinction matters.

Not every unequal outcome is unjust.

Not every equal-looking system is fair.

That is where the arguments begin.

Talent differs.

Effort differs.

Luck differs.

Family support differs.

History differs.

Discrimination exists.

Culture matters.

Policy matters.

Personal responsibility matters.

Randomness matters.

Try fitting all that on a campaign sign.

No chance.

So we reduce.

The system caused it.

The individual caused it.

Pick a team.

Same tribal machinery.

Reality loses.

I have never been comfortable with either extreme.

Maybe that's because my own life resists easy explanation.

What produced whatever opportunities I have had?

Effort?

Yes.

Family?

Yes.

Baseball?

Yes.

Education?

Yes.

Mistakes?

Absolutely.

Luck?

Of course.

People helping me?

Many.

Circumstances outside my control?

Constantly.

Could I isolate percentages?

Twenty-two percent discipline.

Fourteen percent opportunity.

Eight percent talent.

Thirty-one percent luck.

Ridiculous.

Life does not provide clean regression analysis.

I dislike narratives that remove agency.

I also distrust narratives that pretend context does not exist.

Both can become cruel.

Tell a struggling person:

You have no agency because the system controls everything.

You may accidentally teach helplessness.

Tell the same person:

Your circumstances are entirely the product of your decisions.

You may be lying.

The tension matters.

Agency inside constraint.

Constraint without destiny.

That seems closer.

Not clean.

Closer.

Justice lives inside that mess.

We want systems that recognize circumstance without erasing responsibility.

We want responsibility without pretending everyone had identical choices.

No easy formula.

Permanent tension again.

I have coached kids whose natural athletic ability made baseball easier.

They didn't earn the genetics.

They still had to develop them.

Another kid worked harder and remained less athletic.

What is fair?

Equal playing time?

Playing time based on performance?

Developmental opportunity?

Commitment?

Team needs?

Age?

Potential?

Pick one rule and eventually a situation arrives that exposes its weakness.

I have made those decisions.

Sometimes well.

Sometimes probably badly.

Every lineup contains a philosophy whether the coach knows it or not.

Parents see playing time through their child.

Of course.

The child is the center of that emotional universe.

The coach sees thirteen children.

Different perspective.

Neither is automatically dishonest.

But the views collide.

"My son works harder."

Maybe.

"He gives us the best chance to win."

Maybe.

"This is developmental baseball."

Yes.

"We still have a responsibility to the team."

Yes.

You can feel justice becoming situational.

No universal answer arrives.

I've had to tell kids no.

No, you're not starting today.

No, you're not pitching.

No, that's not good enough.

Those moments matter because authority easily interprets its own judgment as fairness.

I decided.

Therefore the decision was fair.

Dangerous.

Authority does not convert subjectivity into objectivity.

I need to remember that.

Every coach should.

Every parent.

Every boss.

Every institution.

Power has a remarkable ability to describe itself as reasonable.

That may be one of the oldest human patterns.

The person with authority often believes the rules make sense.

The person absorbing the consequences sees the blind spots.

Sometimes the authority is right.

Sometimes not.

But power reduces the amount of disagreement you are forced to hear.

That alone should make powerful people suspicious of their confidence.

I have small forms of power.

Coach.

Father.

Landlord.

Employer at times.

Older person speaking to someone younger.

The scale does not need to be enormous for the psychology to appear.

People may nod because they agree.

Or because disagreeing has a cost.

Those look identical from my side.

Chapter One again.

Same nod.

Different realities.

If I care about fairness, I have to create room for someone to say:

Jose, that's not fair.

Then resist the instinct to immediately explain why it is.

That second part is harder.

Justice requires hearing accusations against ourselves.

Not automatically accepting them.

Hearing them.

There is a difference.

Someone feeling wronged does not prove I wronged them.

But my good intention does not prove I didn't.

Both sides deserve investigation.

That is difficult because accusation activates ego.

I want a verdict quickly.

Innocent.

But sometimes the most honest verdict is:

I don't know yet.

I think good intentions are especially dangerous here.

"I was trying to help."

We've covered this.

But in justice, intention can become self-exoneration.

Historically, people have done extraordinary harm while describing their purpose as benevolent.

Civilizing.

Protecting.

Saving.

Educating.

Maintaining order.

Improving society.

Good language can escort terrible actions into the room.

That should make every person suspicious of moral certainty.

Especially when the certainty gives them power over others.

This includes me.

My desire to help a player can become domination.

My desire to protect family can become control.

My desire for discipline can become punishment.

My desire for fairness can become my personal preferences dressed in moral language.

That possibility is uncomfortable.

Good.

I have a phrase that keeps returning:

Good intentions are not Kevlar.

I believe that.

They protect no one from impact.

If I throw a baseball with good intentions and hit you in the face, your nose does not consult my heart before bleeding.

Intent matters morally.

Impact matters physically.

Both.

Societies struggle with the same thing.

Policies are often designed with admirable intentions.

Help people.

Protect workers.

Create opportunity.

Reduce poverty.

Improve safety.

Then incentives respond.

People adapt.

Markets shift.

Institutions protect themselves.

Unexpected costs appear.

The intention remains good.

The outcome may not.

What then?

Ideology often says:

Defend the intention.

Critical thinking asks:

What happened?

The reverse also matters.

A policy can be supported for selfish reasons and still produce beneficial outcomes.

Human motives and social outcomes do not line up neatly.

That bothers our moral storytelling.

We want good people producing good results.

Bad people producing bad ones.

Reality refuses.

Justice therefore requires more than evaluating motives.

We have to examine consequences.

But consequences alone can mislead too.

A good rule may produce a bad outcome in one case.

A bad rule may produce a temporary good outcome.

There is no escape from judgment.

And judgment carries uncertainty.

That is why humility should accompany power.

Rare combination.

Necessary one.

I think about historical atrocities.

They disturb me not simply because evil people existed.

That explanation is almost comforting.

Evil people did evil things.

We are not evil people.

Problem solved.

I find the more frightening possibility more useful:

ordinary human beings can normalize terrible things.

Fear.

Obedience.

Tribalism.

Career incentives.

Conformity.

Resentment.

Ideology.

Desire for order.

Dehumanizing language.

Small compromises.

Then larger ones.

Most people do not wake up saying:

I would like to become part of an atrocity.

Systems recruit people incrementally.

That is why history should not merely teach us whom to condemn.

It should teach us what to monitor in ourselves.

Disallowing tyranny starts internally.

That confession is coming later.

But injustice belongs here too.

What forms of unfairness do I tolerate when they benefit me?

Much harder question than identifying unfairness against me.

Human beings have excellent injustice detectors when disadvantage points inward.

The detector becomes less sensitive when privilege arrives.

I've noticed that in myself.

If a rule hurts me:

Ridiculous rule.

If the same rule benefits me:

Well, there are reasons for it.

Interesting.

If someone gets an opportunity I wanted because of a relationship:

Nepotism.

If someone I love gets an opportunity through a relationship:

Networking.

Language is talented.

Self-confrontation requires catching these translations.

Not so I can eliminate self-interest.

I won't.

But at least I can stop pretending my interests automatically represent justice.

Sometimes I want something because it benefits me.

That's allowed.

Say it.

The trouble starts when preference puts on a judge's robe.

This matters politically.

Groups advocate for their interests.

Normal.

Workers.

Owners.

Tenants.

Landlords.

Parents.

Teachers.

Businesses.

Consumers.

Every group develops moral vocabulary around its position.

Sometimes legitimately.

Sometimes strategically.

Probably both.

The person paying rent experiences one reality.

The person paying a mortgage, taxes, maintenance, and repairs experiences another.

Neither perspective contains the entire system.

The temptation is to turn personal interest into universal ethics.

My side is fairness.

Your side is greed.

Convenient.

Markets do not guarantee justice.

Governments don't either.

That seems obvious, yet political tribes often behave as though one institution is morally pure and the other inherently corrupt.

Markets aggregate preferences, incentives, scarcity, risk and power.

They can produce innovation.

They can also produce exclusion and exploitation.

Government can correct market failures.

It can also produce bureaucracy, coercion, capture and unintended consequences.

Humans operate both.

That should reduce romanticism.

It rarely does.

I do not have a perfect economic system hidden in my desk.

Disappointing, I know.

What I have is suspicion of anyone claiming one institution permanently solves human nature.

Capitalism does not eliminate greed.

Socialism does not eliminate greed.

Government does not eliminate greed.

Markets do not eliminate greed.

Greed changes uniforms.

So does power.

The human being remains.

That is why systems matter.

And why systems never remove the need for character.

Justice becomes even more difficult because suffering is not evenly distributed.

One person's inconvenience can be another person's catastrophe.

A rent increase.

An interest-rate move.

A hospital bill.

A job loss.

A school closure.

Policy arguments become abstract quickly.

Percentages.

Budgets.

Efficiency.

Growth.

Then somewhere is a family.

A person.

A child.

I think good policy has to see both scales.

The aggregate.

The individual.

But there will be tradeoffs.

Someone pays.

Someone waits.

Someone loses.

The idea of a perfectly just policy may be another cracked mirror.

Does that mean stop trying?

No.

That conclusion would be cowardice disguised as realism.

The world being unjust does not release me from trying to behave justly.

If anything, it makes the attempt more important.

The universe will not do the work for us.

There is no natural force automatically correcting discrimination.

No gravity pulling resources toward fairness.

No law of thermodynamics ensuring corrupt institutions eventually become ethical.

People have to act.

Imperfectly.

But action creates another danger.

The person fighting injustice can become unjust.

History supplies endless examples.

Certainty arrives:

Our cause is righteous.

Therefore our methods are justified.

Careful.

A just objective does not sterilize every method.

If I dehumanize people while fighting dehumanization, something has gone wrong.

If my empathy applies only to my tribe, it is not empathy.

It is loyalty.

Loyalty can be admirable.

It isn't the same thing.

This does not mean moral neutrality.

I keep returning to that because it matters.

I can condemn cruelty.

I can oppose injustice.

I can identify unequal power.

I can say one actor behaved worse than another.

Nuance does not require shrugging.

But if I convince myself that righteousness makes me incapable of cruelty, I have removed an important safety mechanism.

The tyrant rarely thinks:

I am the tyrant.

He thinks:

I am necessary.

That should scare us.

The cruel coach does not necessarily think:

I enjoy humiliating children.

He may think:

I'm making them tougher.

The controlling parent thinks:

I'm protecting my child.

The abusive boss:

I demand excellence.

The censor:

I'm protecting people from dangerous ideas.

The revolutionary:

The future requires this.

Intentions again.

Human beings can justify almost anything if the story is large enough.

That is why simple truths matter.

Did you humiliate him?

Did you lie?

Did you deny someone dignity?

Did you exploit the power difference?

Did you punish disagreement?

Did you apply the same standard to yourself?

Those questions cut through ideology.

I need them pointed inward.

I remember learning as a boy that fairness and strength were connected in complicated ways.

Sometimes the person who could impose the rules did.

That did not make the rules fair.

Street life teaches that quickly.

So does history.

So does business.

So does childhood.

The person with leverage experiences choice differently than the person without it.

That does not mean the person without power has no agency.

Again:

Both.

But power changes the menu.

I have to notice that.

The kid afraid of losing playing time does not speak to his coach with the same freedom the coach experiences speaking to him.

The tenant does not always negotiate with the landlord as an equal.

The employee does not challenge the boss with identical risk.

The child and parent are not peers.

Power asymmetry matters.

Pretending otherwise can make an apparently voluntary interaction less voluntary than it appears.

That is worth confronting whenever I hold more power.

When I hold less power, I notice immediately.

Funny.

The world also distributes pain without proportionality.

A small mistake can create enormous consequences.

A drunk decision behind the wheel.

A careless sentence ending a friendship.

A missed diagnosis.

A single pitch injuring an arm.

One moment.

Years of consequence.

Meanwhile someone else behaves recklessly a hundred times and escapes.

That is injustice in the emotional sense even when no person intentionally caused it.

Outcome does not respect proportionality.

We want second chances to be evenly available.

They aren't.

Some mistakes are survivable.

Some aren't.

Some people have money to cushion mistakes.

Others don't.

Some families can absorb failure.

Others collapse under it.

Some children get tutoring.

Others get labeled.

Some defendants have excellent counsel.

Others don't.

Some addicts have treatment.

Others have jail.

Context shapes the cost of error.

That should make those of us with cushions careful about preaching responsibility to people without them.

Responsibility matters.

So do cushions.

I have benefited from cushions.

People.

Family.

Opportunities.

Second chances.

Someone opening a door.

Someone forgiving me.

Someone giving me another opportunity after I wasn't at my best.

I did not manufacture all of that alone.

Remembering this protects me from turning autobiography into ideology.

"If I did it, anyone can."

Dangerous sentence.

No one else lived my exact sequence of chances.

I can share what worked.

I cannot turn my outcome into universal law.

The reverse is also true.

I should not use structural explanations to erase what I did contribute.

That would be dishonest too.

I worked.

I made choices.

I persisted.

I learned.

Both.

Always both.

Maybe justice begins with refusing to steal either causality.

There is another form of injustice that becomes more visible with age:

Time.

Some people get more.

There is no appeals process.

A person can be generous, healthy, disciplined and die young.

Another can abuse himself and live decades longer.

Time is distributed without moral logic.

That may be the purest example of the world's indifference to justice.

It makes resentment toward aging strangely complicated.

If I live long enough to complain about getting old, I have received something many people were denied.

That doesn't mean aging is easy.

The body hurts.

People disappear.

Capabilities change.

Fear grows in different places.

But age itself can be both loss and privilege.

Hold both.

Catastrophe makes all theories smaller.

A hurricane does not ask whether the homeowner deserved the house.

Cancer does not inspect character.

A child's illness does not consult his parents' goodness.

War does not distribute trauma according to virtue.

This is where saying "everything happens for a reason" becomes difficult for me.

Maybe someone believes that sincerely.

I cannot prove them wrong.

But I hesitate to assign cosmic purpose to another person's catastrophe.

Sometimes reverence means refusing explanation.

I can say:

This should not have happened.

Meaning morally.

Humanly.

Emotionally.

Not cosmically.

The distinction matters.

When a child is murdered, I can say it was wrong.

I don't need to claim nature violated one of its laws.

Human morality supplies the judgment.

That is enough.

Maybe more than enough.

The absence of cosmic justice makes human justice sacred.

Not perfect.

Sacred in responsibility.

If nobody is coming to automatically balance the ledger, then what we do matters locally.

Courts matter.

Laws matter.

Due process matters.

Fair procedures matter.

Empathy matters.

Evidence matters.

Accountability matters.

Forgiveness matters.

Second chances matter.

None are guaranteed.

They have to be built.

Protected.

Revised.

And watched carefully because institutions designed for justice are still run by humans.

Every institution carries the possibility of becoming what it was created to prevent.

Police can protect and abuse.

Courts can deliver justice and produce injustice.

Schools can liberate and indoctrinate.

Businesses can create opportunity and exploit.

Governments can protect liberty and restrict it.

Families can nurture and control.

Teams can create belonging and conformity.

The possibility lives in the structure because humans live in the structure.

This is not cynicism.

It's maintenance.

A bridge inspector does not hate bridges.

He looks for cracks because people will cross.

Maybe that's the attitude I want toward institutions.

And toward myself.

Inspection is not hatred.

Criticism is not destruction.

Sometimes criticism is maintenance.

Including self-criticism.

Especially self-criticism.

This book has been one long inspection.

Cracked mirror.

Sophisticated excuses.

Jargon.

Tribes.

Binary thinking.

Fear.

Insignificance.

Now justice.

Every confession is an attempt to locate another crack before somebody falls through it.

That sounds grander than I intend.

Sometimes I am simply trying to become less annoying at dinner.

Both scales.

I think one of the hardest forms of injustice to accept is when someone harms us and never understands.

No apology.

No accountability.

No realization.

We imagine closure.

The person will someday see.

Maybe not.

The villain in my story may die believing he was right.

Then what?

Do I remain emotionally attached to his enlightenment?

That gives him extraordinary power.

Forgiveness becomes complicated here.

I don't think forgiveness means pretending injustice did not occur.

It does not require reconciliation.

It does not necessarily require trust.

Maybe forgiveness sometimes means releasing the demand that the past become different.

That's not absolution.

It's surrendering an impossible negotiation.

You did this.

It mattered.

I cannot undo it.

What now?

There it is again.

Justice wants repair.

Sometimes repair is possible.

Money returned.

Apology.

Restitution.

Changed behavior.

Accountability.

Sometimes not.

The person is gone.

The years are gone.

The injury permanent.

Then justice reaches its limit.

What remains?

Grief.

Meaning.

Boundaries.

Maybe mercy.

Maybe anger.

There is no universal sequence.

People should be careful telling victims how quickly to transcend anything.

Self-forgiveness works similarly.

I have done things I regret.

Nothing monstrous.

Enough ordinary human failures to fill a book.

I can apologize where possible.

Change.

Repair.

But I cannot travel backward.

At some point demanding that my past self have known what I now know becomes another form of injustice.

Toward me.

That does not excuse him.

It places him in time.

I think of the younger Jose.

Certain.

Intense.

Sometimes impatient.

Wanting to be right.

Wanting control.

Doing what he thought was best.

Sometimes being wrong.

He deserves accountability.

He also deserves context.

I give both to everyone else.

Why would I deny either to myself?

The danger of self-confrontation is turning it into self-punishment.

That isn't growth.

It's vanity inverted.

Look how terrible I am.

Still me at the center.

There is a more useful response:

I did that.

Why?

What was mine?

What wasn't?

Who was hurt?

Can I repair it?

What needs to change?

Now move.

Justice.

Not execution.

Maybe this is where justice and mercy need each other.

Justice without mercy becomes mechanical cruelty.

Mercy without justice can become permission.

Another tension.

Human beings keep inventing these pairs.

Maybe because reality cannot be carried by one principle at a time.

I have become suspicious of anyone offering justice without tradeoffs.

Every system has errors.

If we punish more aggressively, innocent people may suffer.

If we make punishment difficult, guilty people may escape.

If we maximize security, liberty can shrink.

If we maximize liberty, some risks increase.

No painless architecture.

The question becomes:

Which errors are we willing to tolerate?

How do we correct them?

Who bears the cost?

Those are uncomfortable questions.

Good.

They should be.

A society that feels no discomfort about the people harmed by its policies is probably not thinking hard enough.

The same is true of a coach.

A parent.

A businessman.

Me.

If my decision has costs, I should be able to look at them.

Not simply recite the benefit.

That is part of the internal audit.

Good intentions protect no one from catastrophe.

They also protect no one from becoming unjust.

That is the deeper confession.

I can mean well and still misuse power.

I can love and still control.

I can fight unfairness and become unfair.

I can believe deeply in discipline and still humiliate someone.

I can advocate empathy and selectively withhold it.

No philosophy exempts me from monitoring behavior.

Maybe this is why character matters most when righteousness is high.

When I know I'm wrong, I am cautious.

When I know I'm right, I become dangerous.

That is worth writing twice.

When I know I'm right, I become dangerous.

Not always.

But certainty loosens restraints.

I interrupt more.

I listen less.

I justify.

I become impatient with objections.

Why hear them?

I'm right.

That is precisely when I need opposition.

A strong coach should want an assistant willing to say:

You're missing something.

A strong president needs institutions saying no.

A strong business owner needs people who can deliver bad news.

A strong parent needs enough humility for a child to say:

You hurt me.

Strength without friction becomes delusion.

Maybe justice begins less dramatically than we imagine.

Not at the courthouse.

At breakfast.

Who gets interrupted?

Whose feelings get dismissed?

Who does the invisible work?

Who gets forgiven?

Who gets held to a harsher standard?

Whose bad day receives context?

Whose becomes character evidence?

Human beings practice justice and injustice in tiny repetitions.

Then act surprised when institutions reflect us.

I am not saying private virtue alone solves structural injustice.

It does not.

Systems matter.

Law matters.

Distribution matters.

History matters.

But institutions do not eliminate the need for humans capable of self-confrontation.

A perfectly designed rule administered by someone incapable of seeing his own bias will still create problems.

So we need both.

Better systems.

Better internal audits.

Neither substitutes for the other.

I wish there were a cleaner answer.

I wish justice operated like gravity.

Automatic.

Predictable.

Universal.

Drop cruelty from a building.

It falls.

Commit corruption.

Immediate consequence.

Exploit someone.

Immediate pain equal to the harm.

Would humanity behave better?

Maybe.

But that isn't our world.

Here, injustice can be profitable.

Cruelty can be rewarded.

Lies can win elections.

Cheaters can win games.

Good people can lose.

The innocent can suffer.

Now what?

Cynicism is one answer.

The game is rigged.

Everyone is corrupt.

Nothing matters.

Protect yourself.

Take what you can.

I understand the attraction.

Cynicism converts disappointment into armor.

If I expect nothing good, no one can surprise me by failing.

But armor blocks other things too.

Trust.

Wonder.

Love.

Possibility.

Maybe that's too high a price.

Chapter Seventeen will have more to say about that.

For now, I want something harder.

To look directly at injustice without becoming devoted to bitterness.

That does not mean being nice.

Sometimes confronting injustice requires anger.

Organizing.

Voting.

Lawsuits.

Protests.

Refusal.

Consequences.

Boundaries.

There is nothing inherently noble about passive acceptance.

But anger should be a tool.

Not a permanent address.

If injustice moves into my identity, the person who harmed me may end up decorating my interior life indefinitely.

I don't want that.

I want anger capable of seeing.

That may be difficult.

Anger narrows.

Sometimes narrowing is useful.

Enough.

Stop.

No.

But afterward I need peripheral vision again.

Otherwise every person starts looking like the original threat.

That's how pain reproduces itself.

I think of a kid who gets a terrible call at home plate.

He knows it.

I know it.

Everybody knows it.

Strike three.

He walks back furious.

What do I tell him?

Not:

The call was fair.

It wasn't.

Not:

Stop being angry.

He has reason.

Maybe:

Yeah. Bad call. Now what?

That phrase again.

He has permission to recognize injustice.

He does not get permission to surrender the next inning to it.

That feels like the balance.

Maybe life is full of bad calls.

Some trivial.

Some devastating.

I can protest the call.

Try to change the umpire.

Change the rules.

Seek accountability.

All appropriate.

But eventually another pitch comes.

If I remain permanently at home plate arguing, the game continues without me.

That is not a message to oppressed people to simply move on.

I want to be precise.

People with power have often used resilience language to avoid repairing injustice.

"Move forward."

"Stop dwelling on the past."

"Take responsibility."

Convenient when you benefited from the harm.

No.

Repair matters.

History matters.

Acknowledgment matters.

Material consequences matter.

But even when justice is pursued properly, no institution can return every stolen year.

That tragic remainder is part of reality.

I wish it weren't.

Confession Number Ten is therefore not:

Accept injustice.

It is:

Stop expecting reality itself to prevent it.

Then responsibility becomes ours.

Mine where I have agency.

Ours where collective action matters.

And even then, humility.

Because today's solution may become tomorrow's blind spot.

The world is not just.

But people can behave more justly.

Institutions can become more just.

Rules can become more fair.

Harm can be reduced.

People can repair.

Not perfectly.

Not permanently.

Better.

There's that word again.

Better.

Not solved.

Better.

Maybe that's the entire project.

I cannot guarantee that being honest will protect me.

I cannot guarantee that treating people well will make them treat me well.

I cannot guarantee my family safety.

I cannot guarantee good coaching produces good outcomes.

I cannot guarantee justice wins.

Those guarantees would be comforting.

They would also be lies.

What I can choose is smaller.

Do I become unjust because injustice exists?

Do I become cruel because cruelty works sometimes?

Do I lie because liars occasionally prosper?

Do I stop trusting because trust can be betrayed?

Do I abandon standards because outcomes are uncertain?

I don't want to.

Maybe character is what remains after the transaction disappears.

I don't do the right thing because the universe promised me a rebate.

I do it because I have to live with the person doing it.

That may be enough moral architecture for one life.

I know I will fail this.

Someone will hurt me and I will want revenge.

Something unfair will happen and I will complain.

Someone else's advantage will irritate me.

I will rationalize my own advantages.

I will occasionally confuse my interests with justice.

I will be inconsistent.

Good.

Not good that I fail.

Good that I know failure remains possible.

The person convinced of his permanent fairness is the person I trust least with power.

Including me.

So I want to keep asking:

Where am I benefiting?

Who is paying?

Would I support this rule if our positions were reversed?

Am I evaluating the action or the person?

Am I giving myself context I refuse to give others?

Am I using good intentions as immunity?

Am I calling something fair because I won?

Those questions won't create perfect justice.

They may reduce bullshit.

I'll take that.

There was a time when I wanted philosophy to solve the contradiction.

How do I reconcile a world filled with suffering with the desire to believe life has meaning?

I don't think reconciliation is required anymore.

Maybe both truths simply sit there.

The world can be unjust.

Life can still contain love.

Terrible things happen.

People still perform beautiful acts.

A child can suffer without deserving it.

A stranger can help without being required.

No cosmic balance.

Human response.

That is smaller than theology.

More immediate too.

Someone falls.

The universe does not care.

I can help him up.

A child gets a bad break.

The universe does not compensate him.

I can refuse to add humiliation.

A family suffers.

I may not be able to fix it.

I can show up.

Someone experiences unfairness because of a system.

I can examine whether I participate in it.

Sometimes the action will be tiny.

Sometimes political.

Sometimes financial.

Sometimes simply shutting up long enough to hear someone else's reality.

None solves the world.

That is no longer my standard.

Maybe the desire to solve the world was ego again.

If I cannot make justice universal, why bother?

Because the person in front of me is not an abstraction.

Chapter Nine.

Zoom out:

Human history is filled with injustice.

Zoom in:

What are you doing right now?

There is my responsibility.

I have come to believe that accepting an unjust world can produce two opposite responses.

One:

Nothing matters.

Take care of yourself.

Two:

Nothing guarantees justice.

So my choices matter more.

I want the second.

Not because I am certain it is philosophically correct.

Because I prefer the person I become when I live that way.

Maybe that is ultimately the test.

The universe keeps no moral scoreboard that I can see.

So I will stop demanding that the final score validate my character.

I may lose after doing everything right.

I may win after doing things badly.

The outcome deserves examination.

It doesn't automatically tell me who I was.

That responsibility remains mine.

And if catastrophe reaches my family, I know I will not greet it with philosophical serenity.

Let's eliminate that fantasy now.

I may rage.

Cry.

Ask why.

Feel cheated.

Forget everything I wrote.

I am human before I am the author of this chapter.

These words are not armor.

Good intentions aren't Kevlar.

Philosophy isn't Kevlar either.

Pain will hurt.

Loss will be loss.

Maybe the value of confronting this now is not that I will become immune.

It is that somewhere inside the pain there may remain a small voice saying:

This was never promised.

You are allowed to hurt.

You are allowed to grieve.

You are allowed to call it unfair.

But you do not have to become unfair in response.

That would be enough.

So here is Confession Number Ten.

I want justice.

I expect I always will.

I want good people protected.

I want cruelty punished.

I want children given fair chances.

I want effort rewarded.

I want institutions worthy of trust.

I want intentions and outcomes to align.

They often won't.

The world is under no obligation to satisfy my moral architecture.

That leaves me with a choice.

I can use injustice as evidence that goodness is naive.

Or I can see goodness as one of the few human answers available to injustice.

Not softness.

Not passivity.

Goodness with boundaries.

Goodness capable of saying no.

Goodness capable of consequences.

Goodness suspicious of its own righteousness.

Goodness that knows it cannot guarantee the outcome.

And acts anyway.

Maybe that's justice at human scale.

Imperfect.

Fragile.

Unfinished.

Never guaranteed.

And because it is never guaranteed, always requiring someone to choose it again.

ELEVEN: I HAVE JUDGED IN OTHERS THE EXACT FLAWS I QUIETLY NURTURE IN MYSELF

Confession #11: My Strongest Criticisms of Other People Sometimes Point Directly Back at Me

There is a special kind of irritation I feel toward certain people.

The arrogant person.

The hypocrite.

The control freak.

The loudmouth.

The person who needs to be right.

The person who gives unsolicited advice.

The person who talks too much.

The person who mistakes experience for infallibility.

The person who criticizes everyone else but cannot tolerate criticism.

I can spot these people quickly.

Remarkably quickly.

Almost professionally.

And that should concern me.

Because I have learned an uncomfortable lesson:

Sometimes I recognize a flaw so quickly in someone else because I have been rehearsing it privately for years.

That doesn't mean every criticism is projection.

Some people really are arrogant.

Some people lie.

Some people manipulate.

Some people are controlling.

Some people are cruel.

I don't want psychology becoming another excuse to deny obvious behavior.

But when another person's flaw produces a reaction in me that seems larger than the event itself, I have started asking a different question.

Not:

What's wrong with him?

But:

Why does this bother me so much?

That question occasionally opens doors I would rather keep closed.

There is a man I know very well.

He interrupts.

He has a thought and becomes afraid the thought might die if it has to wait thirty seconds.

So he jumps in.

Finishes the sentence.

Redirects the conversation.

Adds context nobody requested.

Offers an explanation.

Clarifies the clarification.

He may tell himself:

I'm engaged.

I'm excited.

I'm helping.

Maybe.

Sometimes.

Other times he is simply not listening.

That man is me.

I wish I could say was.

Present tense is more accurate.

I have criticized people for doing exactly that.

"Let her finish."

"He's not listening."

"He just wants to hear himself talk."

Then two days later I am standing in a kitchen or sitting in a car doing the same thing with better vocabulary.

The mind has an extraordinary loophole.

When another person interrupts, it is character.

When I interrupt, it is enthusiasm.

There is Chapter Ten's translation service again.

My flaws arrive with context.

Yours arrive with labels.

This may be one of the central frauds of the ego.

It distributes adjectives unfairly.

My stubbornness:

Conviction.

Your stubbornness:

Closed-mindedness.

My anxiety:

Concern.

Your anxiety:

Overreaction.

My anger:

Passion.

Your anger:

Instability.

My control:

Responsibility.

Your control:

Manipulation.

My desire for recognition:

Wanting my work appreciated.

Your desire for recognition:

Ego.

My criticism:

Honesty.

Your criticism:

Negativity.

Beautiful system.

No wonder I keep winning.

The internal audit becomes difficult because the accountant works for me.

I should probably fire him too.

Projection is a word people use casually.

Sometimes too casually.

Someone dislikes you?

Projection.

Someone criticizes you?

Projection.

Convenient.

That can become another way to avoid criticism.

So I want to be careful.

Sometimes the criticism is accurate.

Sometimes the person genuinely possesses a flaw I do not.

But what interests me is emotional disproportion.

Why does this specific behavior make me furious?

Why do I replay it?

Why do I tell three people about it?

Why am I building a case?

That level of energy deserves investigation.

Maybe the other person is touching something I have been trying not to see.

A mirror again.

Not a clean mirror.

Chapter One already took care of that fantasy.

A cracked mirror.

I see their arrogance.

Maybe it resembles mine from an angle I dislike.

I see their need for control.

Maybe I call mine leadership.

I see their insecurity.

Maybe mine learned to speak confidently.

I see their hunger for approval.

Maybe mine publishes books.

That's uncomfortable.

Good.

I think parenting exposes this mercilessly.

Children inherit things we taught deliberately.

They also absorb things we never intended to teach.

Tone.

Anxiety.

Impatience.

How we speak about people.

How we handle disappointment.

How we react to money.

How we react to failure.

Then one day your child displays something that drives you crazy.

Where did she get that?

Dangerous question.

Sometimes there is a witness in the mirror.

We want children to inherit our virtues and somehow reject our unresolved patterns.

Interesting expectation.

Take my discipline.

Leave the anxiety.

Take my work ethic.

Leave the obsession.

Take my confidence.

Leave the ego.

Take my skepticism.

Leave the cynicism.

Take my intensity.

Leave the impatience.

Children are not editing software.

They absorb wholes before they learn to separate pieces.

That should humble parents.

Coaching does the same thing.

I complain when players tighten up after making mistakes.

Then I have to ask:

What did I do after the previous mistake?

Did my body change?

Did my tone change?

Did I make the error feel larger than the play?

Did I say "next pitch" while communicating "don't do that again"?

Kids read more than language.

They read weather.

Adults create weather.

Then blame children for getting wet.

That sentence bothers me.

Probably because I recognize myself in it.

I have told kids to play loose while carrying enough intensity for the entire dugout.

"Relax."

Meanwhile Coach Jose is pacing like the game determines national security.

Children are excellent contradiction detectors.

Maybe not intellectually.

Physically.

They know when the adult's words and nervous system are telling different stories.

Relax.

But don't screw this up.

Trust yourself.

But do exactly what I'm telling you.

You are your own best coach.

But don't disagree with me.

Aggressive mistakes are okay.

But look at my face after you make one.

Those contradictions matter.

If a player becomes afraid of failure, I can criticize his fear.

Or I can ask whether I helped build it.

Not sole responsibility.

Again, no simplification.

Parents.

Previous coaches.

Temperament.

Peer pressure.

The player himself.

All matter.

But if I am in the environment, I belong in the audit.

That is the difference between influence and omnipotence.

I am not responsible for everything.

I am responsible for examining my part.

I think adults resist that because responsibility feels like blame.

It shouldn't.

Responsibility can be descriptive.

What part was mine?

That question does not require self-hatred.

It requires accuracy.

But if identity is fragile, even ten percent responsibility can feel like one hundred percent condemnation.

So we defend.

I have defended.

I have explained.

I have told myself:

You don't understand what I was trying to do.

Maybe the other person didn't.

But maybe intention is irrelevant to the pattern they're identifying.

If three different people tell me I sometimes talk too much, perhaps I should stop conducting individual investigations into their communication styles.

Maybe I talk too much.

Occam's razor can be rude.

There is another flaw I notice quickly in others:

certainty.

I distrust people who always know.

Politicians.

Coaches.

Experts.

People online.

Someone speaks with total conviction about a complicated subject and I immediately become skeptical.

Good instinct.

Then I listen to myself explaining something I care about.

There he is.

Mr. Certainty.

Maybe with more qualifications.

Maybe with "in my opinion" added to the front.

Still there.

I am capable of using nuanced language with absolute emotional certainty.

That is a clever trick.

"Of course, this is complicated, but..."

Watch out.

Everything before the but is about to be murdered.

I have criticized ideological people while building ideology around anti-ideology.

I have criticized tribalism while enjoying the identity of being non-tribal.

I have criticized ego while taking pride in self-awareness.

There is no philosophical position the ego cannot colonize.

That realization should probably be printed on every page.

Humility can become vanity.

That is one of the funniest examples.

Watch how humble I am.

I admit my flaws.

I say I don't know.

I criticize myself publicly.

Surely that makes me more evolved than people who don't.

And just like that, humility has climbed onto the throne.

Congratulations.

The tyrant changed clothes.

Maybe this is why self-confrontation cannot become an identity.

The moment I become **a self-confrontational person**, I have something new to defend.

Better:

I practice self-confrontation.

Sometimes.

Badly.

With inconsistent attendance.

That feels safer.

I also judge laziness.

This one is complicated for me.

Effort matters enormously in my worldview.

Quiet unseen moments.

Preparation.

Discipline.

Do the work nobody applauds.

I believe in that.

So when I see someone avoiding effort, something in me reacts strongly.

Sometimes appropriately.

But what do I call the moments when I avoid difficult emotional work?

Not laziness.

I call it needing time.

Interesting.

Physical effort is easy for me to respect.

Emotional effort is harder to measure.

A person may be doing enormous internal work while looking inactive.

And sometimes I may be physically working hard partly because work protects me from sitting still.

Who is avoiding effort then?

Busyness can become laziness in disguise.

I like that paradox.

It sounds wrong until you examine it.

I can fill every hour.

Work.

Coach.

Write.

Research.

Exercise.

Fix something.

Plan something.

Now there is no room for the conversation I don't want.

No room for boredom.

No room for grief.

No room for asking:

What am I feeling?

Very productive avoidance.

Maybe the hardest work that day was sitting in a chair.

I have judged people who need constant distraction.

Phone always out.

Television on.

Noise.

Then I look at my own intellectual habits.

Books.

Articles.

Questions.

Projects.

Is curiosity always curiosity?

Or does my mind sometimes keep moving because stillness contains things I have not resolved?

I don't know.

Worth asking.

There is a phrase I like:

quiet unseen moments.

I usually mean the private work that shapes public performance.

The pushups nobody sees.

The swings.

The study.

The preparation.

But perhaps the quiet unseen moments include something else.

Sitting with jealousy before acting on it.

Feeling fear without converting it into anger.

Recognizing resentment.

Allowing grief.

Admitting loneliness.

Not sending the text immediately.

Listening to what your body is saying before constructing an explanation.

Maybe that's training too.

Maybe harder training.

No scoreboard.

No sweat.

No one applauding.

I have also judged attention-seeking.

Especially when it feels obvious.

Look at me.

Post this.

Say that.

Tell everyone.

My reaction can be dismissive.

Then I need to remember:

I publish.

I podcast.

I write.

I put ideas in public.

Do I believe all of that is pure service?

Come on.

There is some desire to be heard.

Some desire to matter.

Some enjoyment of recognition.

Chapter Nine already confessed it.

Why should my expression be meaningful contribution while someone else's is attention-seeking?

Maybe both contain both.

That doesn't make all public expression equivalent.

Quality matters.

Purpose matters.

Impact matters.

But motive is rarely pure.

If I demand purity from others and complexity for myself, the audit is rigged.

I have criticized rich people for greed while protecting things I own.

I have criticized poor financial decisions while making purchases rooted partly in desire.

I have criticized political groups for self-interest while voting based partly on my own.

Again:

Human.

The objective is not to become a creature without self-interest.

It is to stop pretending self-interest only exists in other people.

I have judged resentment.

This one interests me because Nietzsche talks about resentment in ways that can become intellectually seductive.

You notice someone resenting success.

You think:

Ressentiment.

Very sophisticated.

Then someone gets something you wanted.

Maybe recognition.

An opportunity.

Money.

Position.

Attention.

And a tiny internal lawyer begins:

Well, let's examine whether he really deserved it.

There he is.

Ressentiment with a bibliography.

Jealousy is another emotion people prefer diagnosing in others.

"He's jealous."

Maybe.

Have I been jealous?

Of course.

Hard sentence.

Jealousy feels petty because it reveals scarcity in the ego.

Someone else's success threatens my sense of enough.

I dislike that feeling.

So instead of saying:

I am jealous.

I might critique the success.

Maybe the success deserves critique.

Convenient timing though.

A useful test:

Was this flaw equally visible to me before the person received something I wanted?

If not, maybe jealousy bought the magnifying glass.

I do not want this chapter to turn into psychological self-flagellation.

Every criticism does not mean I secretly embody the exact flaw.

That becomes ridiculous.

If I condemn cruelty, maybe cruelty is just wrong.

If I criticize dishonesty, I do not need to discover a hidden criminal enterprise inside myself.

The point is not:

Every judgment is projection.

The point is:

Every strong judgment creates an opportunity for self-audit.

Do I have some version of this?

Under different conditions?

Smaller scale?

Better language?

That question costs very little.

Unless the answer is yes.

Then it costs ego.

I think scale disguises hypocrisy.

I may condemn a behavior in extreme form while tolerating its smaller cousin in myself.

I would never tyrannize a country.

Good.

Do I punish disagreement in a dugout?

I would never steal millions.

Great.

Do I justify taking something small because nobody will notice?

I would never emotionally abuse a child.

Of course.

Do I occasionally use shame because it produces compliance?

Scale matters morally.

But pattern matters diagnostically.

The seed and tree are not equivalent.

Still useful to recognize the seed.

This is one reason history matters to me.

Not so I can compare ordinary flaws to atrocities casually.

That cheapens real suffering.

But history shows what human tendencies can become when amplified by power, fear, ideology, and institutions.

Conformity.

Dehumanization.

Obedience.

Resentment.

Self-justification.

None belong only to historical monsters.

The extreme outcome is rare.

The ingredients are ordinary.

That is the warning.

The easiest moral education says:

Do not become like those evil people.

The harder one says:

Which ordinary tendencies inside me resemble the early ingredients?

That makes history personal.

Uncomfortably.

I have judged authoritarian personalities.

I dislike obedience for obedience's sake.

I want kids to think.

I want people to question.

Then practice gets messy.

A player keeps questioning an instruction.

My patience decreases.

At some point I may say:

Just do it.

Sometimes correct.

Teams need coordination.

Not every moment is debate club.

But I should notice how quickly my philosophy of independent thinking encounters practical limits when independence inconveniences me.

That's useful data.

Maybe character is tested where principle creates personal cost.

Free speech is easy when I like the speech.

Forgiveness is easy when the injury was small.

Patience is easy when I am not late.

Generosity is easy when the resource is abundant.

Independent thinking is easy when the person reaches my conclusion.

Humility is easy when I am winning.

The principle becomes real at the edge.

I have told players:

Trust yourself.

Then they make a decision I dislike.

Now what?

If trust only counts when the outcome matches my preference, I wasn't teaching self-trust.

I was teaching obedience with motivational language.

That is a hard distinction.

I have judged coaches who yell too much.

Then raised my own voice.

My explanation:

Context.

Intensity.

Teaching moment.

Maybe.

Their explanation probably sounded similar inside their head.

That thought is useful.

Before judging someone's self-justification, imagine how yours sounds from outside.

There is a simple exercise I use increasingly.

Take the story I am telling about another person.

Change the name to mine.

"He always needs to be right."

Jose always needs to be right.

"He can't accept criticism."

Jose can't accept criticism.

"He talks about himself constantly."

Jose talks about himself constantly.

"He wants control."

Jose wants control.

Sometimes the sentence feels absurd.

Good.

Discard it.

Sometimes it lands with uncomfortable accuracy.

Keep that one.

I think relationships improve when two people can do this without weaponizing it.

That last part matters.

Self-awareness should not become ammunition.

If someone confesses insecurity and you later use the insecurity to win an argument, congratulations.

You have taught them to become less honest with you.

Vulnerability requires some safety.

Not immunity from accountability.

Safety from exploitation.

The same is true with children and players.

If I ask:

"Tell me what I'm doing wrong as a coach,"

and then defend myself for twenty minutes, I taught them not to answer next time.

The invitation was fake.

I have to be willing to absorb the answer.

Even if I disagree.

Especially if it stings.

I want players capable of telling me:

Coach, when you do that, I tighten up.

What happens inside me?

First reaction may be:

But that's not what I'm trying to do.

Chapter Two.

Defense attorney clocking in.

Maybe instead:

Tell me more.

That phrase could change relationships.

Not agreement.

Investigation.

The difficult part is that some criticism will be unfair.

A kid may blame the coach for his own lack of preparation.

A family member may misread you.

A colleague may project onto you.

What then?

Listen without automatically accepting the verdict.

Self-confrontation does not mean surrendering judgment.

It means giving the evidence a hearing.

Same courtroom.

Different rules.

I have to learn the difference between guilt and information.

Someone criticizes me.

I do not have to feel guilty immediately.

I can ask:

Is there information here?

Maybe ten percent.

Maybe eighty.

Maybe none.

Extract it.

That seems more useful than choosing between defensiveness and self-condemnation.

There is a narcissistic form of self-criticism too.

I know that sounds contradictory.

It isn't.

A person can spend hours obsessed with his flaws.

How terrible am I?

Why did I do that?

What does this say about me?

Still me.

Me.

Me.

Sometimes the healthiest response is:

You acted badly.

Apologize.

Change it.

Go wash the dishes.

The universe does not require a dissertation.

Insignificance remains useful.

I think I have occasionally confused depth with duration.

If I think about a mistake for three days, I must be confronting it deeply.

Not necessarily.

Maybe I'm ruminating.

Real confrontation might take thirty seconds:

I was jealous.

I acted petty.

I owe him an apology.

Done.

Then behavioral change becomes the proof.

This whole book risks that problem.

Nineteen chapters analyzing myself.

That could become a monument to self-absorption if I'm not careful.

The point cannot be endless inspection.

Eventually the mechanic has to put the car back on the road.

The audit must produce behavior.

Otherwise I become an expert on my flaws instead of someone changing them.

Chapter Two again.

Explanation versus change.

These chapters keep walking into one another.

Maybe because the flaws do too.

I judge people who repeat the same mistakes.

Then I repeat mine.

That's almost comical.

"How many times does he need to learn this?"

Good question, Jose.

How many?

I have known intellectually for years that I talk too much.

Still here.

I know I can become intense.

Still here.

I know I sometimes project expectations.

Still here.

Awareness is not elimination.

Maybe expecting one insight to permanently rewrite human behavior is another form of magical thinking.

Habits are rehearsed.

So is change.

That makes me slightly more compassionate toward repetition.

Not permissive.

Compassionate.

The addict who relapses.

The person returning to an unhealthy relationship.

The kid making the same mechanical error.

The adult falling into the same argument pattern.

Knowing is not doing.

I've lived that gap.

Maybe everyone does.

There is arrogance in telling someone:

"You know better."

Knowing better is not always enough.

I know plenty of things I fail to embody.

That doesn't eliminate responsibility.

It changes the question.

What prevents knowledge from becoming behavior?

Fear?

Habit?

Environment?

Reward?

Identity?

Lack of skill?

That investigation is more useful than contempt.

I have judged weakness in people.

That one is painful.

Someone cannot handle pressure.

Someone gives up.

Someone needs reassurance.

Part of me values toughness.

I still do.

But what happens when I am the one needing reassurance?

Do I call it weakness?

Usually not.

I call it being human.

Convenient again.

Perhaps other people are human too.

Annoying.

Empathy often begins with symmetrical language.

Give the other person the vocabulary you give yourself.

You are anxious.

Not pathetic.

You are learning.

Not incompetent.

You are scared.

Not weak.

You made a mistake.

You are not the mistake.

That does not mean avoiding standards.

It means applying humanity consistently.

The reverse matters too.

Sometimes I give myself language that is too gentle.

Context can become anesthesia.

Maybe I need the vocabulary I use for others.

You were selfish.

You were controlling.

You weren't listening.

No qualification.

Then:

What now?

Balance.

I think the most useful mirror may be the person who irritates me.

Not because he always reflects me accurately.

Because irritation generates energy.

Energy illuminates attachment.

Why am I so invested?

Maybe because I value the opposite virtue.

Good.

Or maybe because he is carrying something I have disowned.

Also possible.

Investigation.

Carl Jung would have plenty to say about shadows.

I find the basic idea useful without pretending I am a Jungian scholar.

Human beings hide pieces of themselves that do not fit the identity they prefer.

Then those qualities can become easier to notice in others.

I do not need mystical language for this.

If I desperately need to think of myself as generous, acknowledging selfishness becomes difficult.

So selfishness appears vividly everywhere else.

If I need to believe I am humble, arrogance becomes intolerable in others.

Maybe the intensity of my judgment helps protect the story.

That doesn't mean integrate cruelty.

Some tendencies need restraint.

The goal isn't:

I contain all things, therefore all behavior is acceptable.

No.

The goal is recognition.

I have aggression.

Fine.

What do I do with it?

I have ego.

Fine.

I have jealousy.

Fear.

Control.

Vanity.

Resentment.

These are human materials.

Denying them does not make them disappear.

Maybe acknowledged material becomes easier to shape.

A pitcher who knows his fastball runs arm-side can account for it.

A pitcher who insists the ball is straight keeps missing the target.

Maybe personality works that way.

Know the movement.

Then aim.

I like that.

I don't need to turn every flaw into a virtue.

I need to know where the ball tends to go.

My intensity runs arm-side.

My explanations sometimes sail high.

My ego occasionally pulls me off the plate.

Good.

Now account for it.

This may be the most baseball way I know to understand self-awareness.

The pitcher does not hate the movement.

He works with it.

He may modify mechanics.

Train.

Adjust.

But awareness begins with observing what the ball actually does.

Not what he intended.

There is that word again.

Outcome over intention when measuring.

Maybe I should approach myself less like a defendant and more like a pitcher chart.

What happened?

Count it.

Interrupted three times.

Got defensive twice.

Offered advice nobody requested.

Felt jealous.

Raised voice.

Listened well once.

Apologized quickly.

No moral drama.

Data.

Then patterns.

What environment produces the miss?

Fatigue?

Fear?

Feeling disrespected?

Need for control?

Now training becomes possible.

That seems more effective than declaring myself good or bad.

Identity resists measurement because identity prefers stories.

Behavior gives data.

Maybe getting better requires fewer character declarations.

"I'm patient."

Compared to what?

How did I behave when delayed?

"I'm open-minded."

How did I respond when challenged?

"I'm humble."

How often did I need credit?

"I'm empathetic."

Whose pain did I dismiss?

Questions make adjectives nervous.

Good.

I want my players to understand this too.

Don't tell me you're a hard worker.

Show me the quiet unseen moments.

Don't tell me you're mentally tough.

What do you do after the error?

Don't tell me you trust your teammates.

How do you react when one fails?

Maybe adults should live under the same standard.

Don't tell me what you value.

Show me where it costs you.

I have judged hypocrisy harshly.

Maybe because hypocrisy frightens me.

We all contain distance between stated values and behavior.

The question is how much distance and what we do when we notice.

A hypocrite may not simply be someone who fails to live up to a value.

By that definition, everyone is guilty.

Maybe hypocrisy becomes more serious when a person uses the value primarily to judge others while exempting himself.

That distinction matters.

I want to catch myself there.

If I preach discipline but sometimes fail discipline, human.

If I use discipline to shame others while refusing to inspect my failures, hypocrisy grows.

If I preach humility and then cannot tolerate criticism, problem.

If I preach open-mindedness and dismiss disagreement, problem.

The gap between principle and practice is inevitable.

The response to the gap is character.

Maybe Confession Number Eleven is not:

I am every flaw I criticize.

That would be false.

It is:

I am capable of more of them than my ego prefers to admit.

That sentence creates caution.

The capacity matters.

Under stress.

Under fear.

Under power.

Under humiliation.

Who knows?

I want fewer illusions about my moral immunity.

The person who believes:

I could never do that

may know less about himself than the person who says:

Under what circumstances could I become capable of something resembling that?

That question is uncomfortable.

But it creates guardrails.

If I know humiliation makes me controlling, I can notice humiliation.

If exhaustion makes me crueler, sleep matters.

If feeling ignored makes me talk more, I can recognize the urge.

If authority makes me less curious, I need people who challenge me.

Self-awareness should redesign environment.

Not merely produce adjectives.

There is another uncomfortable truth.

Sometimes I criticize in others what I secretly envy.

The person who speaks freely.

Too loud.

Maybe I wish I were less inhibited in that setting.

The person who spends freely.

Irresponsible.

Maybe I wish I could enjoy money without calculating everything.

The person who rests.

Lazy.

Maybe I am exhausted.

The person who doesn't care what everyone thinks.

Arrogant.

Maybe I care too much.

Again, not always.

But worth checking.

Judgment can reveal values.

It can reveal fear.

It can reveal envy.

It can reveal truth.

The emotional reaction alone does not tell me which.

I have to investigate.

That seems to be the annoying message of this entire book.

Investigate.

No shortcuts.

I sometimes wish getting better had a simpler mechanism.

Notice flaw.

Delete flaw.

Install virtue.

Done.

Instead I get:

Notice flaw.

Understand pattern.

Try differently.

Forget.

Repeat flaw.

Notice faster.

Repair quicker.

Repeat less often.

Maybe.

That is less cinematic.

More believable.

Progress may be measured in latency.

How long does it take me to notice?

When I was younger, maybe years.

Then months.

Then days.

Now sometimes minutes.

Occasionally while I'm doing it.

That's useful.

Maybe one day before.

That would be impressive.

Not perfection.

Earlier recognition.

Shorter distance between error and correction.

That may be getting better.

I want to become less fascinated by whether I am a good person.

That question may be too broad.

A good person can behave badly.

A bad person can behave kindly.

Labels again.

Better questions:

What did I do?

Why?

Who was affected?

What needs repair?

What pattern is developing?

Those questions move.

"Am I good?" sits there waiting for a verdict.

The desire for a verdict may itself be ego.

Tell me I'm good.

Then I can relax.

No.

Maybe character requires permanent maintenance.

Like a house.

Nobody says:

I cleaned the kitchen in 2014. Why is it dirty again?

Because people live here.

Maybe the mind is like that.

You do not complete humility.

You practice it.

Ego returns.

You clean again.

Resentment returns.

Clean.

Fear.

Clean.

Control.

Clean.

No shame that dust exists.

But don't pretend the house cleans itself.

I like that better than moral perfection.

Maintenance.

That feels human.

So here is Confession Number Eleven.

I have judged arrogance while nurturing ego.

I have criticized control while trying to control.

I have mocked certainty while becoming certain.

I have complained about people who talk too much while exhausting innocent listeners.

I have criticized unsolicited advice while giving enough of it to qualify as a public utility.

I have called other people defensive while assembling entire legal teams in my head.

I have seen selfishness clearly when it belonged to somebody else.

I have called my own selfishness context.

I have judged weakness while wanting compassion for mine.

I have judged hypocrisy while carrying gaps between my own language and behavior.

There.

Not absolution.

Not self-condemnation.

Evidence.

The question is what I do with it.

I can stop judging anyone.

That would be foolish.

Judgment is necessary.

Character matters.

Behavior matters.

Boundaries matter.

I should recognize dishonesty.

Cruelty.

Manipulation.

Negligence.

The lesson is not blindness.

It is symmetry.

Before turning a flaw into someone's permanent identity, check my own house.

Before enjoying moral superiority, ask whether the same tendency appears in me under another name.

Before condemning someone's failure to change, remember the distance between my own awareness and behavior.

Before demanding mercy for myself, make sure I have some available for others.

Maybe the old phrase about removing the beam from your own eye survives because the human problem survives.

Millennia pass.

Technology changes.

Our language becomes more sophisticated.

Still:

Look at yourself.

Damn.

You would think humanity could have invented a software update.

No.

Same hardware.

New apps.

I find something strangely hopeful in that.

If these contradictions are human rather than uniquely mine, I don't need to waste energy being shocked that I have them.

The task is not proving I am exempt from humanity.

Chapter Nine already settled my significance.

I am not exempt.

Good.

Now work.

And perhaps the person who irritates me becomes useful.

Not intentionally.

They don't have to know.

Their arrogance reminds me to examine mine.

Their control reminds me to release some of mine.

Their insecurity reminds me where mine hides.

Their need to be right reminds me to ask another question before answering.

They become unwilling coaches.

I have had many.

Some of them probably consider me one too.

Fair enough.

The next time I say:

I can't stand people who...

I want a small alarm to sound.

Not to silence the judgment.

To finish the sentence differently.

I can't stand people who always need the last word.

Where do I do that?

I can't stand people who are condescending.

When does my experience become condescension?

I can't stand people who make everything about themselves.

How much time have I spent writing about myself today?

That one is funny.

Good.

Keep laughing.

The mirror is still cracked.

But perhaps other people hold fragments I cannot see alone.

Some reflect me unfairly.

Some distort.

Some expose an angle I would never choose.

I do not have to believe every reflection.

I should probably look.

Because the flaw I despise in someone else may have nothing to do with me.

Or it may be standing quietly behind my shoulder.

Same posture.

Different clothes.

Waiting for me to stop pointing long enough to notice.

That's Confession Number Eleven.

And increasingly, when I point one finger outward, I am trying to remember the oldest anatomical joke in morality:

there are still three pointing back.

TWELVE: WINNING AN ARGUMENT HAS TOO OFTEN BEEN A PROXY FOR LACKING CHARACTER

Confession #12: I Have Sometimes Preferred Being Right to Being Worthy of Being Heard

I know how to argue.

That is not always a compliment.

I can find the weak spot.

I can hear the inconsistency.

I can remember the sentence from ten minutes ago that contradicts the sentence being said now.

I can separate premise from conclusion.

I can challenge the analogy.

I can ask the question that forces somebody to reveal the assumption underneath the argument.

And when I am emotionally detached, all of that can be useful.

It can clarify.

It can protect against bullshit.

It can expose bad reasoning.

It can make a conversation sharper.

But when my ego enters the room, the same skills become weapons.

That is the confession.

I have sometimes used intelligence to win a conversation I should have been using character to survive.

Those are very different victories.

There is a particular moment in an argument when the subject quietly changes.

It happens fast.

At first, two people are discussing something.

Money.

Politics.

Baseball.

Parenting.

A decision.

Something somebody said.

Then one person feels accused.

Or dismissed.

Or embarrassed.

Or misunderstood.

Now the original subject is almost irrelevant.

The conversation has become:

Who gets to leave this room feeling superior?

That is when argument turns primitive.

The vocabulary may remain sophisticated.

The nervous system does not.

I have been there.

Too many times.

Someone says:

"That's not what I meant."

I hear:

You're misrepresenting me.

Now I want to prove I am not.

I bring evidence.

"You literally said..."

Dangerous sentence.

Sometimes necessary.

Often gasoline.

Now the other person feels cornered.

They explain.

I identify a contradiction in the explanation.

Wonderful.

Point for Jose.

They get defensive.

I become calmer.

This is an especially dirty trick.

Because once I feel I have the logical upper hand, I can become extremely composed.

Now my calmness becomes evidence of my reasonableness.

Their agitation becomes evidence against them.

Look at me.

Measured tone.

Precise language.

No yelling.

Surely I am the mature one.

Maybe.

Or maybe I helped push another person into emotional overload and then used their reaction as Exhibit A.

That possibility deserves more examination than I used to give it.

There is no rule saying the calmest person is right.

Manipulators can be calm.

Cruel people can be articulate.

A person with more verbal skill can control the frame of an argument without ever raising his voice.

I have to remember that because language is one of my stronger tools.

Power is still power when it speaks politely.

I have seen this with adults talking to children.

The adult says:

"Explain why you did that."

The child tries.

The adult interrupts.

"That doesn't make sense."

The child tries again.

"You're changing your story."

Now the child is flustered.

"See? You don't even know why you did it."

Maybe the adult is right.

Or maybe the adult has turned a twelve-year-old nervous system into a deposition.

Those aren't the same thing.

The adult has twenty, thirty, forty years more experience with language.

Who exactly are we impressed with when the adult "wins"?

Coaches do this too.

A player misses a sign.

"Why didn't you bunt?"

"I thought—"

"But we went over the sign."

"I know, but—"

"So why didn't you bunt?"

The coach may be trying to establish accountability.

Fair.

But notice how easily accountability becomes a demand for surrender.

Sometimes there is no answer the kid can give that the adult will accept.

The real required response is:

"You're right, Coach."

Then peace returns.

That is not always conversation.

Sometimes it is ritual submission.

I need to be very careful with that.

I value accountability.

Still do.

If the player missed the sign, he missed it.

No need to pretend otherwise.

But what is the goal of the conversation?

To help him recognize the mistake?

To understand why it happened?

To prevent repetition?

Or to make sure he acknowledges my authority?

Those goals can overlap.

They can also separate.

The moment I care more about acknowledgment than learning, ego has probably joined the coaching staff.

Arguments have a similar hidden question.

Do I want truth?

Or concession?

Very different.

Truth may require me to lose part of the argument.

Concession requires you to.

Guess which one the ego prefers.

I have had arguments where halfway through I realized the other person had a point.

Terrible moment.

Because now I have options.

Option one:

Say it.

"You're right about that."

Healthy.

Option two:

Quietly narrow my original claim so that I technically remain correct.

Much more fun.

"Well, that's not really what I was saying..."

There he is again.

Defense attorney.

Excellent work.

We salvage the record.

No admission required.

Humans are extraordinary at moving goalposts inside conversation.

I know because I have moved entire stadiums.

Someone disproves my first point.

Fine.

That wasn't the main point.

They address the main point.

Well, you're missing the broader context.

They address the context.

Okay, but you haven't considered intention.

They discuss intention.

Now we're talking about principles.

Soon nobody remembers the original question.

But I have not said:

I was wrong.

Mission accomplished.

What did I win?

This is the part that interests me now.

What is the value of an argument victory if the relationship leaves weaker?

Not every relationship should be preserved.

Sometimes truth matters more than harmony.

Sometimes conflict is necessary.

I am not advocating appeasement.

But if the person I care about leaves a conversation feeling humiliated, unheard, or smaller, and I leave thinking:

Technically, I made the better argument—

what exactly did I accomplish?

I have confused intellectual victory with character.

They are not interchangeable.

A person can win an argument and behave terribly.

A person can lose an argument and show enormous character.

That should be obvious.

Still, the ego loves scoreboards.

So it creates one.

Point.

Counterpoint.

Gotcha.

Contradiction.

Evidence.

Win.

But character is keeping a different score.

Did I listen?

Did I distort what they said?

Did I attack the weakest version of their point?

Did I interrupt?

Did I remain curious?

Did I become cruel?

Did I exploit something vulnerable they told me earlier?

Did I keep the argument proportional?

Did I know when to stop?

Those questions are less exciting.

More important.

I think this is why Socratic questioning can be both beautiful and obnoxious.

Questions can open thought.

They can also become traps.

"Why do you believe that?"

Good question.

Unless I already know the answer I want and am simply walking you toward embarrassment.

Then the question is theater.

I am not learning.

I am prosecuting.

I have done that too.

I can ask questions that sound open-ended while containing a verdict.

"So you really think...?"

"Wouldn't you agree that...?"

"How can you say that when...?"

The grammar contains a question mark.

The psychology contains a hammer.

Maybe genuine curiosity has one requirement:

The answer has to be allowed to change me.

Otherwise I'm not asking.

I'm performing.

That is hard.

Because most debates are not structured around changing oneself.

They are structured around exposing the other person.

Social media has made this nearly perfect.

Someone posts an argument.

Another person replies.

Not to persuade the original poster.

To signal to everyone watching:

Look how wrong this person is.

Public argument becomes theater.

The audience matters more than the participants.

Humiliation becomes currency.

I understand why.

Winning feels good.

Especially publicly.

That should worry us.

I do not think disagreement is the problem.

I like disagreement.

Real disagreement can be energizing.

Two people testing ideas.

Pushing.

Questioning.

Clarifying.

I have had conversations where disagreement made both people sharper.

Those are valuable.

The problem begins when truth becomes secondary to identity.

Now the position belongs to me.

If you attack it, you attack me.

Chapter Six again.

Belief and self become fused.

Changing my mind becomes losing face.

Now character has competition.

There is a version of masculinity tied to this.

I remember the impulse.

Don't back down.

Don't let him get the last word.

If challenged, respond.

If embarrassed, restore position.

Social hierarchy matters.

It matters on streets.

In locker rooms.

At school.

In workplaces.

Men learn very early that visible retreat can be interpreted as weakness.

Sometimes that has real consequences.

But the habit can outlive the environment that created it.

Now a disagreement at dinner starts carrying the emotional weight of a street confrontation.

Ridiculous.

The body doesn't always know.

Someone questions my judgment.

A younger version of me might feel:

Stand your ground.

Why?

Because if I yield one point, maybe I lose status.

To whom?

My wife?

My daughter?

A friend?

A twelve-year-old?

What am I protecting?

The answer is often ego.

Not principle.

This is where being raised around masculine pride requires an internal audit.

Pride can keep a person upright.

It can protect dignity.

It can resist humiliation.

I do not want to eliminate it.

But pride can also make apologies feel like defeat.

Then relationships pay.

"I said what I said."

There is a sentence with a body count.

Maybe not literal.

Emotional.

I have used versions of it.

Maybe not those exact words.

But the posture.

I meant it.

That's how I feel.

I'm entitled to my opinion.

All true.

None answer:

Was I unnecessarily cruel?

Opinion and delivery are different.

Truth and timing are different.

Honesty and character are different.

There is a myth that honesty requires brutality.

"I'm just being honest."

Another dangerous sentence.

Usually followed by something the speaker wanted permission to say anyway.

Honesty does not require removing judgment from delivery.

A surgeon uses a sharp instrument.

He still cares where he cuts.

Precision matters.

I can tell a kid:

"You're not ready to pitch in this game."

True.

Or:

"You're not good enough."

Maybe also technically true according to some standard.

Not the same sentence.

One describes readiness.

The other threatens identity.

Language matters.

The goal is not making every truth painless.

Impossible.

The goal is not adding unnecessary pain simply because I possess authority.

In arguments, the same principle applies.

I can tell someone:

"That claim isn't supported by what you're showing me."

Or:

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

The second may feel better.

Why?

Because now I am not merely correcting an idea.

I am establishing rank.

That's the ego's favorite side business.

I have noticed that when I feel least secure in an argument, I can become most interested in status.

Credentials.

Experience.

Years.

Who has done what.

I have decades in baseball.

True.

Does that make a fifteen-year-old's observation automatically wrong?

No.

But if I cannot answer his point, experience becomes tempting.

"I've been doing this longer than you've been alive."

Classic.

Maybe true.

Maybe irrelevant.

Experience should produce evidence.

Not end conversation.

This applies outside baseball too.

Age does not automatically equal wisdom.

Education does not automatically equal correctness.

Expertise matters enormously.

But expertise should strengthen arguments, not replace them.

A doctor's opinion matters more than mine on many medical questions because of training and evidence.

That does not make every doctor infallible.

The opposite mistake is equally stupid:

experts can be wrong, therefore expertise means nothing.

No.

Nuance.

Again.

Arguments tempt us toward false binaries because winning becomes easier if the opponent has to be entirely wrong.

If someone makes one bad point, dismiss everything.

If they use one incorrect statistic, the broader concern disappears.

If their motive is imperfect, their claim becomes invalid.

That is lazy reasoning.

I have used it.

Probably everyone has.

A flawed messenger can deliver a true message.

An admirable messenger can deliver nonsense.

Separate claim from carrier.

Harder than it sounds.

I think politics has destroyed this skill in many people.

If my side says it, I begin sympathetic.

If theirs says it, suspicious.

Again, normal tribal psychology.

But then debate becomes useless.

We are not examining arguments.

We are identifying uniforms.

My team wins.

Your team loses.

The content becomes secondary.

One of the most revealing exercises is imagining the exact statement delivered by someone from the opposite tribe.

Would I react the same?

Probably not.

That should bother me.

If principle changes when the speaker changes, maybe it isn't principle.

Maybe it is loyalty.

I have had to catch this in myself.

Someone I respect says something provocative.

I search for charitable context.

Someone I distrust says the same thing.

I search for danger.

Maybe context really differs.

But my interpretive generosity is uneven.

That is worth auditing.

Winning arguments becomes addictive because victory offers emotional closure.

I was right.

Therefore I don't need to examine anything else.

Very efficient.

But some of my best conversations have ended without a winner.

"I see your point."

"I still disagree."

"Fair enough."

Nothing resolved.

No trophy.

Yet both people leave with more understanding.

That may be a better outcome than consensus.

Consensus can be fake.

Understanding can coexist with disagreement.

I want more of that.

Not endless relativism.

Real positions.

But less need for conversion.

I do not need every person to leave thinking like me.

That realization connects to insignificance.

What an exhausting ambition.

Eight billion humans.

Good luck, Jose.

Maybe start with not interrupting one.

There is another hidden reason I have liked winning arguments.

It protects self-worth.

If I can demonstrate intellectual competence, I feel secure.

Maybe that goes back to being self-taught.

If I can prove the reasoning, I belong.

If I can defend the idea against somebody with more credentials, I have earned a seat.

That motivation is understandable.

It can also make every disagreement feel like a qualification exam.

No wonder the nervous system activates.

Autodidacts can carry a particular insecurity.

Did I miss something formal education would have taught me?

Am I making connections that are insightful or just undisciplined?

Do people hear the argument or see the lack of credential?

These questions can create healthy humility.

They can also create overcompensation.

More references.

More explanation.

More insistence.

Maybe I am not only defending the point.

Maybe I am defending my right to make one.

That is useful to know.

I do have the right to think.

So does everyone.

The question is whether the thinking survives examination.

No biography required.

Good argument.

Bad argument.

Evidence.

Counterevidence.

That is enough.

At least ideally.

Human power dynamics complicate everything.

But the principle helps me relax.

I do not need to prove I belong in every room.

I can just bring the thought.

If it is weak, let it lose.

That sentence has become important.

Let the idea lose.

Not me.

The idea.

Separate them.

If somebody dismantles something I believe, what exactly have I lost?

An incorrect belief.

That sounds like profit.

Why does it feel like theft?

Ego.

Identity.

Investment.

I spent years thinking this.

Now you're telling me it's wrong?

Sunk cost applies to beliefs too.

Maybe especially beliefs.

I remember arguments from decades ago where I cannot even remember the subject.

But I remember wanting to win.

That's revealing.

If the content was so important, why is it gone?

Maybe the emotional objective was never the content.

It was status.

Recognition.

Being understood.

Not feeling small.

Those are human needs.

But I wish I had known what game I was playing.

Sometimes when people argue, the actual sentence they need to say is:

I feel disrespected.

Instead they debate history for an hour.

Or politics.

Or money.

Or whose turn it was.

The argument provides cover because admitting hurt feels more vulnerable.

Men do this particularly well.

We build Supreme Court cases around feelings we could describe in six words.

That includes me.

"I'm hurt by what you said."

That is difficult.

"Your logic is inconsistent because..."

Much safer.

One invites relationship.

The other establishes defense.

Maybe arguments sometimes persist because the wrong language is being used.

I think we are debating facts.

You think we are debating respect.

I produce more evidence.

You become more upset.

I interpret your emotional response as inability to reason.

You interpret my reasoning as refusal to care.

Now both people have evidence supporting their original interpretation.

Perfect feedback loop.

I've lived versions of this.

I would like to live fewer.

The solution is not abandoning facts when emotions appear.

That can become another mistake.

Feelings are real.

They are not always accurate descriptions of external reality.

"I feel ignored" deserves attention.

It does not automatically prove I ignored you.

But if I respond only with factual rebuttal—

"I answered three of your texts yesterday"—

I may miss the relational content.

What does ignored mean here?

Tell me.

Again:

Curiosity.

This book keeps arriving at curiosity like a baseball returning to the pitcher.

Maybe curiosity is ego's opposite.

Not humility exactly.

Curiosity.

Ego wants to establish.

Curiosity wants to discover.

When I am genuinely curious, winning becomes less important because information becomes the reward.

That's a better incentive structure.

The trouble is that curiosity vanishes under threat.

The nervous system wants resolution.

Friend or enemy?

Safe or dangerous?

Submit or fight?

No time for nuance.

So perhaps character in argument depends partly on recognizing activation.

My jaw is tight.

Voice speeding.

I'm rehearsing my response while they speak.

There.

The body is telling me conversation has become combat.

Maybe I need to slow down.

Not because the other person is right.

Because I am becoming less capable of hearing whether they are.

There is nothing weak about saying:

"Give me a second."

Or:

"I want to make sure I understand what you're saying."

Or:

"I might be reacting to this more than I realize."

Those sentences once felt almost unnatural to me.

They still don't always arrive on time.

Maybe progress is latency again.

Notice sooner.

The apology is another place where argument reveals character.

A bad apology keeps the case alive.

"I'm sorry you felt that way."

Classic.

No admission.

"I'm sorry, but..."

Anything after but deserves investigation.

"I'm sorry if I..."

If?

Did you?

Maybe not.

Sometimes uncertainty is legitimate.

But frequently the conditional is legal protection.

A clean apology is frightening because it surrenders control of the verdict.

"I was wrong to say that. I'm sorry."

Now the other person can still be angry.

They may not forgive.

They may not respond generously.

That feels unfair.

Wait.

Why did I apologize?

To purchase forgiveness?

There goes the transaction.

Maybe apology is simply responsibility.

What they do with it is theirs.

I have to work on that.

Part of me wants the apology to restore equilibrium.

I admit fault.

You say it's okay.

We move on.

Nice exchange.

But the injured person may need longer.

If I become irritated by their continued hurt, my apology may have contained an expiration clause they never agreed to.

That is not repair.

That's invoice management.

Character requires tolerating consequences after concession.

That is harder than saying sorry.

There are arguments I regret winning.

Not because my point was wrong.

Because I recognize now that I made someone feel small.

That sticks differently.

I cannot undo those conversations.

I can let them teach me.

One lesson is simple:

Do not use every weapon simply because you have it.

That may be character.

If I know someone's insecurity, don't deploy it.

If I know their verbal weakness, don't exploit it unnecessarily.

If I can embarrass them in front of others, don't confuse restraint with weakness.

If I catch a contradiction, ask whether correcting it serves truth or simply humiliates.

There are contexts where aggressive cross-examination is necessary.

Courtrooms.

Investigations.

Public accountability.

But most kitchens are not courtrooms.

Most marriages are not debate clubs.

Most dugouts don't need prosecutors.

I think restraint is underappreciated because nobody sees the sentence you chose not to say.

The comeback.

The correction.

The humiliating detail.

You could have used it.

You didn't.

Quiet unseen moment.

There it is again.

Maybe character is built partly from unused ammunition.

That doesn't mean suppress everything.

Resentment grows when truth is never spoken.

The point is intentionality.

Say what needs saying.

Not everything available.

Big difference.

This is also how I want to speak to kids.

A coach sees weaknesses immediately.

You could list ten.

Which one matters now?

Maybe none.

A player just struck out.

Does he need a mechanical correction before reaching the dugout?

Sometimes.

Often he needs to breathe.

The ability to identify a flaw does not create an obligation to announce it immediately.

That's something I wish I understood earlier.

Expertise creates inventory.

Wisdom chooses timing.

Arguments work the same way.

I may notice five flaws in what you said.

Do I need all five?

Maybe one question resolves the issue.

Maybe the relationship matters more than total demolition.

Again, not avoiding truth.

Proportion.

I think character has a relationship to proportion.

Small offense.

Small response.

Major harm.

Major response.

But ego inflates minor threats.

Someone rolls their eyes.

Now I want a constitutional convention.

Someone corrects me publicly.

Internal emergency.

Why?

Status.

Fear.

The old machinery.

Insignificance helps here too.

Relax.

Nobody is writing the history of this dinner.

There is a phrase athletes know:

Act like you've been there before.

Maybe intellectual life needs one.

Someone disagrees with you.

Act like you've been disagreed with before.

You don't need to panic.

Your existence remains intact.

You can hear them.

I want that kind of confidence.

Not certainty.

Security.

The secure person can concede because concession does not destroy identity.

He can say:

Good point.

I hadn't considered that.

You're right.

I still disagree overall.

Tell me more.

These are strong sentences.

They don't feel weak to me anymore.

Maybe this is what the will to power looks like in conversation.

Not overpowering you.

Overpowering my need to overpower you.

That is much harder.

Nietzsche probably wouldn't appreciate every way people reduce that concept, so I am not claiming philosophical purity.

I am using it personally.

What form of mastery matters?

Can I master the impulse to humiliate?

Can I let an argument end without the last word?

Can I accept misunderstanding?

Can I protect the relationship without surrendering the truth?

That's power I respect.

There is one more uncomfortable confession.

Sometimes I argue because I enjoy it.

There.

Not everything needs pathology.

I like ideas.

I like intellectual friction.

A good argument can be fun.

That is fine.

The problem is forgetting that the other person may not be playing the same game.

I think we're sparring.

They think we're fighting.

Now my enjoyment becomes their distress.

Context again.

Know the room.

Some people love debate.

Others experience debate as conflict.

Neither is automatically superior.

If I care about communication, I should understand the difference.

Not everyone needs to engage me on my preferred terrain.

That is part of empathy.

I have probably exhausted people with conversations I thought were stimulating.

A person says something casually.

I ask six questions.

They just wanted coffee.

My apologies to innocent civilians.

Again:

Humor.

If I cannot laugh at myself, this project becomes unbearable.

Maybe Chapter Twelve is less about argument than power.

Verbal power.

Intellectual power.

Relational power.

The temptation to use a strength beyond what the situation requires.

A strong person can dominate.

Character decides whether he does.

A smart person can humiliate.

Character decides whether he does.

A coach can control.

Character decides where authority stops.

Winning is easy to recognize.

Character is quieter.

I once would have asked:

Did I make the better argument?

Now I want to add:

What did the argument make me?

Did I become more patient?

More precise?

More curious?

Or did I become crueler?

Smaller?

More invested in status?

If winning makes me less worthy of being heard, the victory is strange.

A person may forget my reasoning and remember how I made them feel.

That sentence is often overused, but there is truth in it.

I don't think feelings should replace substance.

But substance delivered without relational awareness can fail to land.

A coach can be technically perfect and practically useless if no player can hear him.

Communication requires reception.

Otherwise I'm just making noise accurately.

This connects back to Chapter One.

Words are cracked mirrors.

Chapter Two:

Explanations become excuses.

Chapter Three:

Complexity becomes camouflage.

Now:

Argument becomes conquest.

Same tool.

Language.

Different misuse.

Maybe language is not dangerous by itself.

Power is.

Words become one of power's instruments.

So I need rules for myself.

Not commandments.

Guardrails.

When I feel the urge to win, ask what is actually at stake.

When the other person becomes emotional, do not automatically treat emotion as evidence against their argument.

When I catch a contradiction, ask whether it matters.

When I realize I'm wrong, say it before the ego rewrites the claim.

When I apologize, don't negotiate immediate forgiveness.

When I know a vulnerable detail, do not weaponize it.

When someone says they feel unheard, stop explaining how carefully I was listening.

Maybe listen.

Simple.

Embarrassingly simple.

Chapter Three approves.

I will violate these guardrails.

Probably soon.

Again, this is confession, not certification.

But awareness can shorten the distance.

Maybe one day, halfway through an argument, I will hear myself trying to win and say:

Jose, what are you protecting?

That's a useful question.

My position?

My ego?

My dignity?

The relationship?

Truth?

Sometimes the answer will justify continuing.

Sometimes it won't.

There is a difference between standing my ground and refusing to move because people are watching.

I want to learn it.

A principle should survive scrutiny.

An ego just needs spectators.

Some arguments should not be had.

That's another lesson.

Not because the issue is unimportant.

Because the participants are incapable of productive exchange in that moment.

Tired.

Angry.

Drunk.

Humiliated.

Public setting.

Wrong time.

Walking away can be wisdom.

It can also be avoidance.

Same action.

Different motive.

Again, no easy answer.

But "not now" can be one of the most mature sentences in language.

Not never.

Not surrender.

Not now.

I did not always appreciate that.

I thought unresolved meant unfinished.

Finish the conversation.

Get clarity.

Reach conclusion.

Sometimes forcing clarity creates damage.

People need space.

The nervous system needs to settle.

An argument resumed tomorrow may become an entirely different conversation.

That is not weakness.

Timing is part of truth.

I want to teach players that too.

You do not have to solve your swing while furious.

You do not need the mechanical answer immediately after striking out.

Feel it.

Breathe.

Then investigate.

Maybe adults need the same dugout.

The world rewards visible victories.

Debate clips.

Gotcha moments.

Knockout lines.

We call somebody "destroyed" because another person said something clever.

Destroyed.

Interesting word.

As though conversation were supposed to leave bodies.

I don't want that as my model.

I have spent enough time around competition to know competition belongs somewhere.

Baseball.

Sports.

Markets, to a degree.

Games.

But if every human interaction needs a winner and loser, eventually relationships become scoreboards.

That sounds lonely.

I would rather leave certain conversations with both people standing.

Maybe disagreeing.

Maybe uncomfortable.

But intact.

That requires character more than rhetoric.

Confession Number Twelve:

I have enjoyed being right too much.

I have sometimes turned conversation into competition.

I have used precision as a weapon.

I have used calmness as proof of superiority.

I have narrowed arguments after realizing my original position was weak.

I have wanted concession more than understanding.

I have listened for errors instead of meaning.

I have occasionally asked questions whose answers I had no intention of letting change me.

I have thought winning proved something about my intelligence.

Maybe it did.

It sometimes proved something less flattering about my character.

I do not want to stop arguing.

That would be dishonest.

I like intellectual exchange.

I want stronger arguments.

Better reasoning.

More evidence.

Fewer slogans.

But I want to become less interested in defeating people.

Ideas can fight.

People do not always have to.

Maybe the next time someone says something I believe is wrong, I can begin with:

What am I missing?

Not because I'm probably wrong.

Not because they're probably right.

Because the question keeps the door unlocked.

Then I can challenge.

Disagree.

Push.

Maybe strongly.

But if I discover a piece of truth on their side, take it.

No shame.

Truth has no jersey.

And if the conversation ends with them unconvinced?

Fine.

The universe continues.

Chapter Nine.

I am not important enough to require universal agreement.

Neither are they.

Maybe we can eat.

There is a moment in baseball when a batter argues a called strike.

Sometimes the call is terrible.

He turns around.

Says something.

The umpire responds.

There is a point after which no argument will change the count.

The next pitch is coming anyway.

A good hitter eventually gets back in the box.

I like that image.

Because I have spent portions of my life arguing calls that were already on the scoreboard.

Proving.

Replaying.

Defending.

Maybe I was right.

Still two strikes.

What now?

That question saves me again.

What now?

You won the argument.

What now?

The person is hurt.

What now?

You were right.

What now?

The relationship is colder.

What now?

You exposed the contradiction.

What now?

Did anything become better?

That final question is the one I want to carry.

Not:

Did I win?

Did anything become better?

Sometimes winning helps.

Sometimes losing helps.

Sometimes neither word applies.

Maybe the conversation simply revealed something.

About them.

About me.

About the limits of language.

Enough.

The man I want to become does not need to lose every argument to prove humility.

That would be another performance.

He does not need to soften every truth.

He does not need to agree.

He can be forceful.

Precise.

Difficult.

He can say no.

He can challenge bullshit.

But he knows that another person's humiliation is not evidence of his own strength.

He knows that having the last word is not the same as having character.

He knows that being worthy of being heard may require becoming better at hearing.

And every once in a while, when the perfect comeback arrives in his head—

sharp,

accurate,

devastating—

he smiles.

Lets it die there.

And discovers that nothing important was lost.

THIRTEEN: I PREFER THE COMFORT OF BEING A CRITIC TO THE MESSINESS OF BEING A CREATOR

Confession #13: Criticism Lets Me Feel Intelligent Without Requiring Me to Risk Failure

It is easier to tell you what is wrong with the building than to lay a brick.

I know this because I have spent a lot of time inspecting buildings.

Metaphorically.

Ideas.

Coaches.

Politics.

Businesses.

Parents.

Books.

Systems.

People.

I can walk into almost anything and identify the flaw.

That process is useful.

Sometimes necessary.

But it also has a hidden pleasure.

If I am the critic, I get to stand outside the mess.

My shoes stay clean.

Someone else took the risk.

Someone else built the thing.

Someone else made the decision.

Someone else put his name on it.

I arrive afterward with better lighting.

That is an excellent position.

Very little exposure.

Plenty of authority.

And almost no risk of being the person everybody else gets to inspect.

That is the confession.

I have sometimes preferred criticism because criticism allows me to feel intelligent without requiring me to create anything vulnerable enough to fail.

Critics get hindsight.

Creators get uncertainty.

That is an unfair advantage.

A coach makes a pitching change.

The reliever gets hit.

Now I can explain exactly why the move was wrong.

Beautiful.

Where was my certainty before the pitch?

Different story.

A business owner launches a product.

It fails.

Afterward, everybody knows why.

Wrong timing.

Wrong price.

Wrong market.

Wrong messaging.

Should have known.

Maybe.

But before the launch, those variables were probabilities.

Afterward they become facts.

Criticism often uses tomorrow's information to evaluate yesterday's courage.

I have done that.

Probably more than I realize.

There is a strange comfort in analysis.

Analysis gives me distance.

Distance gives me perspective.

Perspective is useful.

But distance can also protect me from responsibility.

If I am examining your decisions, I do not have to make mine.

That is where criticism becomes refuge.

I have always liked asking questions.

Why does this work?

Why doesn't that?

What are the blind spots?

What are we missing?

Excellent questions.

I still want them.

But questions can become an infinite hallway.

At some point a door has to open.

At some point:

Build something.

Coach the team.

Write the book.

Start the business.

Make the call.

Commit to the idea.

Risk being wrong.

The critic can live forever in preparation.

The creator eventually has to ship.

That word has become important to me.

Ship.

Release.

Publish.

Submit.

Play the game.

Once it exists outside me, control drops.

Now people can judge.

Terrible arrangement.

The first criticism is usually internal.

Before anybody else sees the work, I can destroy it myself.

This paragraph isn't good enough.

That idea has been said before.

This sounds pretentious.

This chapter is too long.

This one is too simple.

Someone will misunderstand this.

Someone smarter has already written it better.

Why bother?

The internal critic is incredibly efficient.

He does not require publication.

He can cancel the project before opening day.

No public failure.

Perfect record.

Fear loves perfectionism.

Perfectionism gets excellent branding.

High standards.

Craftsmanship.

Attention to detail.

All admirable.

And sometimes true.

But perfectionism can become fear in a tuxedo.

"I'm not ready to publish yet."

Maybe.

Or:

I don't want anyone to discover this isn't as good as I hoped.

There is the simpler sentence.

I know this tension because writing exposes it.

Words in my head feel unlimited.

Every unwritten book is potentially brilliant.

Nothing has gone wrong yet.

Then I type.

Now the idea has edges.

Weak sentences.

Repetition.

Contradiction.

Something beautiful in thought becomes ordinary on paper.

Creation is humiliating that way.

It translates potential into evidence.

Potential is flattering.

Evidence is rude.

The unwritten book can be anything.

The written book becomes this book.

Now it can disappoint me.

The player in my imagination makes every play.

The player on the field boots a ground ball.

The business plan predicts growth.

The business encounters customers.

The theory works beautifully until reality arrives.

That is creation.

Reality gets a vote.

Criticism delays the vote.

I can keep improving the theory.

Research more.

Talk more.

Refine.

Build another model.

Ask another expert.

At some point what I call preparation may simply be hiding.

Chapter Eight again.

Fear speaking responsibly.

There is a reason people say:

"Don't let perfect become the enemy of good."

I understand the sentence.

I have repeated it.

Living it is harder.

Because good is visible.

Perfect remains hypothetical.

Once I release something merely good, I lose the fantasy of what it could have been.

That is a small grief.

Maybe creation requires grieving the imaginary masterpiece.

The perfect book.

Perfect business.

Perfect coaching philosophy.

Perfect parenting decision.

Perfect conversation.

None survive contact with life.

So I have to choose between imaginary perfection and actual participation.

That is a harder choice than it sounds.

I have coached players who practice beautifully and tighten in games.

We call them different things.

Practice players.

Game anxiety.

Maybe.

But underneath may be something simple.

Practice preserves control.

The game introduces judgment.

The outcome counts.

The kid would rather take another hundred swings in the cage than enter the batter's box with two runners on and everybody watching.

I understand him.

Adults do the same thing with different equipment.

Take another course.

Read another book.

Revise the résumé again.

Develop the business plan.

Attend another seminar.

Study the market.

Talk about the podcast.

Outline the book.

Plan the workout.

At some point preparation becomes simulation.

Life waits outside.

This does not mean preparation is avoidance.

Preparation matters.

I believe deeply in the quiet unseen moments.

But quiet unseen moments are supposed to prepare us for visible moments.

If I never step into the visible moment, the private work becomes a hiding place.

That's the distinction.

I think criticism works similarly.

Good criticism improves creation.

Bad criticism replaces it.

That line matters.

If I analyze baseball because analysis helps me coach better, useful.

If I spend all day explaining what other coaches do wrong and never put myself in a dugout, different.

If I criticize economic policy and then refuse any responsibility for how decisions affect people in my own sphere, something is missing.

If I critique writers but never risk a sentence, easy.

If I critique parents but have never had to make the decision at two in the morning, humility is appropriate.

Experience does not make criticism infallible.

Lack of experience does not make criticism worthless.

But skin in the game changes the texture of judgment.

I respect people more after I try doing what they do.

Not automatically.

Sometimes trying something makes the flaws clearer.

But creation introduces information criticism cannot provide from outside.

Weight.

Timing.

Tradeoffs.

Fatigue.

Responsibility.

Consequences.

You discover why imperfect decisions exist.

The critic sees three bad options and says:

Choose better.

The creator sometimes says:

Those were the options.

Coaching taught me this.

From the stands, every lineup is obvious.

Every pitching change.

Every defensive position.

Every bunt decision.

Parents know.

Spectators know.

I have been a spectator too.

Much cleaner up there.

Then you are the coach.

Thirteen players.

Different abilities.

Different personalities.

Pitch counts.

Injuries.

Confidence.

Parents.

Schedule.

Tournament rules.

Long-term development.

Short-term competition.

Now the obvious choice gets less obvious.

That does not excuse mistakes.

It creates respect for decision-making under constraint.

The same applies to politics.

It is easy to say:

Why don't they just—

Dangerous opening.

Maybe they should.

But governing means tradeoffs.

Budgets.

Law.

Implementation.

Opposition.

Incentives.

Unintended consequences.

Human behavior.

The critic often has one objective.

The policymaker has twelve.

Again, not immunity.

Context.

Business taught me the same thing.

Customers have opinions.

Owners have bills.

Employees have needs.

Suppliers have terms.

Taxes exist.

Repairs exist.

Rent exists.

Something breaks on Friday at five.

Now theory becomes plumbing.

I have learned that there are people who are brilliant at explaining business and terrible at operating one.

There are also operators who should probably read more.

Again:

Both.

This chapter is not an attack on critics.

Criticism is essential.

Every creator needs it.

I need it.

A world with creators but no critics becomes self-congratulatory nonsense.

A coach needs assistants who see what he misses.

A writer needs editors.

A business needs customers willing to say:

This doesn't work.

A democracy needs opposition.

A scientist needs falsification.

Criticism is one of the mechanisms that prevents creation from becoming delusion.

The danger is when criticism becomes identity.

When I derive more self-worth from noticing flaws than building anything worth criticizing.

There is a particular ego available to the critic.

I see what fools miss.

That is intoxicating.

The contrarian version:

Everyone is excited about this.

I see the problem.

Maybe I do.

Maybe I simply enjoy standing outside enthusiasm because detachment feels intelligent.

Cynicism can make a person look sophisticated very quickly.

Enthusiasm risks embarrassment.

If I say:

I love this idea,

and it fails, I look foolish.

If I say:

This will probably fail,

and it succeeds, people forget.

If it fails, I become prophetic.

Excellent asymmetric bet.

No wonder cynicism is attractive.

Optimism has reputational risk.

So does hope.

So does creation.

The critic often carries put options on everyone else's dreams.

I have done versions of that.

Maybe not maliciously.

But I know the pleasure of seeing a blind spot before somebody else.

There is ego there.

The question becomes:

What do I do with the insight?

Do I use it to improve the thing?

Or to establish that I was smarter than the person building it?

Different motives.

Same criticism.

I think this matters especially in mentoring.

A young person has an idea.

The experienced person sees twelve problems immediately.

That's experience.

Useful.

Now what?

List all twelve?

Maybe.

Or ask:

Which problem actually needs solving first?

There is a cruelty in handing someone the full weight of your experience before they have developed the muscles to carry it.

Sometimes wisdom is sequencing.

I have probably over-explained problems to younger players.

I see where the mechanics may fail three steps later.

So I want to fix all three now.

The player just needs the next move.

Criticism can become overwhelming precisely because it is accurate.

That is another paradox.

Truth delivered in the wrong dose can become useless.

Creation requires protecting early stages.

A seed is not a failed tree.

Obvious.

Yet adults evaluate beginnings with standards designed for finished products.

The first draft is bad.

Of course.

The first business model is incomplete.

Probably.

The young player's swing has holes.

He's young.

The problem comes when criticism mistakes incompleteness for incapacity.

I've done that too.

I have also done the reverse.

Romanticized potential.

This idea could be amazing.

Great.

Will it be built?

Potential without creation becomes fantasy.

Maybe the seed is healthy.

Plant it.

Then let reality decide what grows.

There is another discomfort in creation.

You become responsible for consequences you could not fully predict.

That is frightening.

The critic can always say:

I warned you.

The creator has to say:

That happened because of something I built.

Maybe not intentionally.

Maybe indirectly.

But still.

Power and responsibility enter.

Maybe that's one reason people retreat into commentary.

Commentary is safer.

Writers experience this when readers interpret work differently.

You write one thing.

Someone takes another.

What responsibility do you have?

Some.

Not total.

Language is cracked.

Chapter One.

But creation means accepting that your output can do things you did not intend.

The book is no longer private.

Someone may use an idea wisely.

Someone may distort it.

Someone may quote it out of context.

You cannot control everything.

Still, you created.

That matters.

Coaches create environments.

That may be one of the heaviest realizations I have had.

I am not just teaching baseball.

I am helping create an emotional climate.

What happens after errors?

Who feels safe asking questions?

What behavior receives praise?

What gets laughed at?

How does authority react to disagreement?

Those patterns become culture.

Culture is a creation.

If it becomes harmful, I cannot simply critique the kids living inside it.

I helped build the room.

Parents create environments too.

Businesses.

Schools.

Countries.

Every creator eventually lives among unintended consequences.

This should produce humility before creating.

But not paralysis.

If the fear of unintended consequences stops all action, nothing moves.

Creation requires responsible imperfection.

That phrase feels right.

Responsible imperfection.

I used to think courage in creation meant confidence in the outcome.

Now I think it may mean accepting responsibility without certainty.

Build carefully.

Listen.

Release.

Observe.

Revise.

That sounds more realistic.

Creation as iteration.

Not revelation.

This is especially important to an autodidact.

When no formal structure tells you when you are ready, you can prepare forever.

One more book.

One more source.

One more thinker.

Maybe then I will have earned the right to speak.

But the right to speak does not come from total knowledge.

No one has total knowledge.

It comes with responsibility.

Say what you know.

Identify what you don't.

Remain open to correction.

That is enough to begin.

I think I waited at times for permission that nobody was withholding.

That is an embarrassing realization.

No gatekeeper standing there.

Just fear dressed as intellectual humility.

Who am I to write this?

Fair question.

Who am I not to?

Also fair.

I am one human being documenting what I have seen in myself.

That claim is modest enough.

I do not need a university to certify my interior life.

But self-education carries obligations.

I cannot simply connect ideas because they sound good.

I should verify.

Read carefully.

Understand enough to avoid borrowing a philosopher's name merely to decorate my opinion.

Chapter Three again.

Creation requires discipline.

The freedom of the autodidact should not become freedom from rigor.

That matters to me.

I may still get things wrong.

I will.

Someone trained formally may correct me.

Good.

That is part of publishing.

If being corrected is unacceptable, keep the notebook private.

Once I enter public conversation, friction is part of the cost.

That is fair.

There is another place I have preferred criticism:

my own life.

It is easier to explain what I should change than to change it.

I can produce an excellent analysis of my tendencies.

Intensity.

Control.

Need for explanation.

Ego.

Projection.

Fear.

Wonderful.

At some point this entire book could become criticism of Jose Franco.

Then what?

Chapter Two asked it already.

Now what?

Creation must occur internally too.

I have to create new behavior.

Not merely identify old behavior.

That is harder.

You cannot criticize yourself into a new habit.

At least I cannot.

You need practice.

Replacement.

Repetition.

If I interrupt, practice waiting.

If I over-explain, practice shorter answers.

If I become defensive, practice one curious question.

If I give unsolicited advice, practice asking:

Do you want my thoughts?

That's creation.

A new response.

Small.

Physical.

Visible.

This makes growth less philosophical.

Again, that annoys me.

I want the insight to do more work.

But insight without rehearsal is like watching hitting videos without swinging.

Useful to a point.

Then pick up the bat.

Maybe character is created more than discovered.

I like that.

We talk about finding ourselves.

What if part of the self is constructed through repetition?

I become patient by practicing patient behavior.

I become brave by doing frightened things responsibly.

I become generous through acts of generosity.

Not perfectly.

Not permanently.

But behavior leaves residue.

The quiet unseen moments again.

Criticism identifies the gap.

Creation fills it.

That is the relationship I want.

Not either/or.

The critic asks:

What is wrong?

The creator asks:

What can I build instead?

Both voices.

In sequence.

There is a huge difference between saying:

This team lacks trust.

And creating trust.

The first takes ten seconds.

The second may take months.

Trust requires consistency.

Fairness.

Listening.

Consequences.

Reliability.

Shared struggle.

A thousand interactions.

Criticism is compressed.

Creation is slow.

That may be why criticism is more emotionally satisfying.

Immediate clarity.

Creation requires patience.

Same with institutions.

"This system is broken."

Maybe.

What replaces it?

Now things get difficult.

Every alternative has costs.

Every design creates incentives.

Someone can criticize the replacement.

Probably correctly.

That is not an argument against reform.

It is an argument for humility.

Builders need critics.

Critics should occasionally build.

Maybe both groups would become less arrogant.

I think political discourse would improve dramatically if people had to administer one year of the policies they advocate.

Not because experience guarantees wisdom.

But implementation teaches friction.

The clean principle meets forms, budgets, human incentives, exceptions, enforcement, and people who behave unpredictably.

Reality is excellent continuing education.

I have been wrong about what would work.

Every coach has.

You design a drill.

Looks perfect.

Kids hate it.

Or it produces the opposite behavior.

Okay.

Change it.

That's creation.

No identity crisis required.

The drill failed.

Not the coach as a human being.

If the coach needs the drill to succeed because the drill represents his intelligence, he will defend bad design.

Again, ego interferes with iteration.

Creators need enough detachment to kill their own creations.

That is hard.

You invest time.

Love.

Identity.

Then evidence says:

This isn't working.

Now what?

The critic inside needs permission to speak.

Interesting reversal.

Sometimes the creator becomes too attached.

So criticism returns as medicine.

That is why I do not want to eliminate either side.

I want better coordination.

Build.

Inspect.

Revise.

Build again.

That cycle feels like getting better.

Not certainty.

Iteration.

Maybe that is what self-confrontation should become.

Not a courtroom.

A workshop.

I like that image better.

Pieces everywhere.

Some tools sharp.

Something always unfinished.

Occasional mistakes.

Measure.

Cut.

Wrong cut.

Start another piece.

No final version.

Just better fit.

Maybe that is what a human life actually looks like.

Criticism can also become cruelty when it forgets the courage involved in creation.

Someone writes a bad book.

They still wrote a book.

Someone starts a business that fails.

They still stepped into uncertainty.

Someone makes a terrible film.

They made something.

That does not mean we pretend the work is good.

Standards remain.

But respect the risk separately from the quality.

Those are different judgments.

I want to do that with kids.

A player attempts the aggressive play and fails.

Evaluate execution.

Also recognize courage.

Aggressive mistakes greater than passive mistakes.

I believe that.

Why?

Because passive mistakes protect the ego.

You never discover the limit if you never approach it.

Creation works similarly.

The person who never publishes maintains a perfect unwritten record.

The player who never attempts the difficult throw never throws it away.

Also never learns whether he can make it.

This does not mean reckless creation.

Throw from the outfield fence when there is no play?

Not aggressive.

Stupid.

Again, judgment.

But fear of error should not turn players into spectators inside their own game.

Or adults inside their lives.

I think of people who talk for years about writing a book.

I understand them.

The imaginary book is safe.

The written book can suck.

But there is dignity in a finished bad book that the imaginary masterpiece does not possess.

Because reality touched it.

Now you can improve.

You cannot revise fantasy.

That may be one of the most important sentences for me:

You cannot revise what you refuse to create.

I can critique forever.

Nothing moves.

Creation creates evidence.

Evidence permits correction.

Correction creates growth.

Fear hates the first step because the first step threatens the fantasy.

I think my baseball philosophy developed this way.

Not from one revelation.

Years.

Trying.

Watching.

Making mistakes.

Seeing what worked.

Seeing what failed.

Changing.

Some principles became stronger.

Some disappeared.

Two-walk rule.

Pitch to contact.

Defense.

Throw strikes.

Trust.

Quiet unseen moments.

None arrived on stone tablets.

They were created through experience.

They should remain open to experience.

If the evidence changes, maybe the philosophy should too.

Otherwise creation becomes doctrine.

This book should follow the same rule.

I am publishing these confessions in September 2026.

That does not make them permanent.

If I read them in ten years and disagree, good.

I hope I have enough courage to say so.

A book should document where I was.

Not imprison where I go.

There is another reason criticism is comfortable.

The critic is rarely accountable for optimism.

Creators need belief.

Not certainty.

Belief.

Enough to begin.

That creates vulnerability because someone can call you naive.

Sometimes they will be right.

Still, nothing new is built by people waiting until success becomes guaranteed.

There is no such moment.

I have become increasingly interested in the space between cynicism and naïveté.

Cynicism:

It won't work.

Naïveté:

It cannot fail.

Creation:

It might fail. Let's build carefully and find out.

That is where I want to live.

Not as sexy.

Much more useful.

A coach says:

This kid can become a pitcher.

Maybe.

That belief influences opportunity.

Work.

Attention.

But if evidence later says otherwise, adapt.

Belief opens the door.

Reality determines what happens next.

The creator needs hope and measurement.

Heart and audit.

Again, two things at once.

I have seen what happens when adults make predictions about children too early.

He's not athletic.

He'll never pitch.

Can't hit.

Maybe true at twelve.

Maybe not.

Children are unfinished projects with nervous systems.

Criticism can freeze them inside a snapshot.

That's dangerous.

The creator asks:

What can develop?

Not:

What do I wish were true?

But:

What happens if we build?

This book itself is an attempt at building.

I can critique language.

Tribalism.

Fear.

Ego.

Justice.

Argument.

Fine.

But if all nineteen confessions merely diagnose the human condition, I have created an intellectual autopsy.

Maybe useful.

Still dead.

I want something living underneath.

A practice.

A question.

A next action.

How to get better.

Not just:

Here's what's wrong.

So maybe every criticism needs a companion question.

Language distorts reality.

How can I speak more carefully?

My explanations become excuses.

What behavior changes?

Jargon hides simple truths.

What is the simple sentence?

Nuance isolates.

Can I tolerate belonging less?

Uncertainty remains.

Can I act responsibly anyway?

Fear arrives.

What is it protecting?

I am insignificant.

What deserves attention now?

The world is unjust.

Where can I behave more justly?

I project flaws.

What is mine?

I argue to win.

What would make this conversation better?

And now:

I criticize.

What will I build?

That is the chapter.

What will I build?

Simple question.

Terrifying.

Because an answer creates responsibility.

If I say nothing, I remain safe.

If I say:

a better relationship,

now behavior has to change.

A better team culture?

Start tomorrow.

A book?

Finish it.

A healthier financial life?

Make the allocation.

A more honest relationship with my daughter?

Listen differently.

A calmer version of myself?

Practice the pause.

Creation demands verbs.

Criticism loves nouns.

Broken system.

Bad coach.

Weak culture.

Toxic politics.

Creation asks:

Do what?

Verbs expose seriousness.

Build.

Call.

Write.

Apologize.

Save.

Teach.

Listen.

Leave.

Stay.

Practice.

Finish.

Publish.

Those words create risk.

Good.

Maybe risk is evidence that I'm no longer merely commenting.

I have spent much of my life as both critic and creator.

I ran a business.

Coached teams.

Raised a daughter with my wife.

Wrote books.

Made financial decisions.

None of this chapter is a confession that I never acted.

It is subtler.

Even while creating, I have sometimes retreated emotionally into criticism because criticism feels safer than confronting the imperfection of what I built.

My team loses.

Critique the kids.

Business struggles.

Critique conditions.

Relationship strains.

Critique communication.

Maybe all contain truth.

But the creator's question remains:

What was mine?

What do I build differently?

That may be one of adulthood's central responsibilities.

Stop waiting for ideal conditions.

Create within the conditions that exist.

Not accept injustice.

Not surrender ambition.

But stop requiring the world to become easier before I begin.

The streets never offered ideal conditions.

Neither did baseball.

Neither does parenting.

Neither does marriage.

Neither does aging.

You use the field you're given.

Bad hop?

Move your feet.

Wind blowing in?

Adjust.

Umpire's zone wide?

Protect.

Not fair?

Chapter Ten.

Now what?

There it is.

Always.

Maybe creation is the ultimate answer to **now what?**

Not always building a product.

Creation in the broadest sense.

Create a response.

Create a boundary.

Create a habit.

Create meaning.

Create repair.

Create a different pattern.

The past gives materials.

The present gives tools.

Future unknown.

Build anyway.

I think this is also where the will to power becomes practical.

Not dominating the world.

Creating form from chaos.

Taking raw material—

fear,

habit,

experience,

mistakes,

pain—

and shaping something.

That idea speaks to me.

But again, careful.

"Will to power" can become grand language for ordinary work.

Maybe the simpler truth is:

Stop talking and make something.

Chapter Three approves again.

So here is Confession Number Thirteen.

I have enjoyed the safety of criticism.

I have sometimes used insight to avoid exposure.

I have hidden fear inside preparation.

I have judged finished products against imaginary perfection.

I have enjoyed seeing blind spots in other people's work.

I have sometimes mistaken cynicism for sophistication.

I have criticized people making difficult decisions with information I received only after the outcome.

I have analyzed my own flaws more easily than changed them.

And I have occasionally preferred the comfort of saying:

This is wrong

to the vulnerability of answering:

Then what am I willing to make better?

That needs to change.

Not by becoming less critical.

By becoming more responsible with criticism.

Criticism should earn its keep.

If I identify a problem, maybe I should help build the alternative where I have standing and ability.

Not every problem is mine to solve.

Insignificance again.

But within my radius?

Do something.

If I tell a kid his footwork is wrong, teach him the movement.

If I tell a coach his environment creates fear, examine mine.

If I complain about the political conversation, speak differently.

If I dislike how people use language, use mine carefully.

If I think people are too tribal, resist my tribe.

If I complain about lack of empathy, practice it when inconvenient.

Otherwise criticism becomes consumption.

I consume flaws.

Get stimulated.

Feel intelligent.

Nothing changes.

Creation is messier.

It produces things that can disappoint me.

Good.

Maybe disappointment is the tax for participation.

I would rather pay it.

There is a baseball field after rain.

Mud.

Uneven dirt.

Puddles.

Everybody has an opinion.

Field's terrible.

Should've covered it.

Drainage sucks.

All probably true.

Then somebody picks up a rake.

That is creation at human scale.

Not glamorous.

No theory.

Fix the spot you can reach.

I like that image.

Maybe that's enough.

I still want critics around me.

Sharp ones.

Honest ones.

People willing to say:

Jose, this isn't working.

But I want them to know I'm allowed to ask:

What would you try?

Not as a gotcha.

As invitation.

Maybe they see something.

Maybe together we build better.

That is criticism graduating into contribution.

And when I criticize myself, same rule.

You're talking too much.

Okay.

What do you build instead?

A pause.

You are controlling.

Build trust.

You're afraid.

Build tolerance for uncertainty.

You're defensive.

Build curiosity.

You want recognition.

Build something worth doing even without applause.

Small structures.

Repeated.

Maybe a self is made that way.

I no longer want to spend all my time standing outside the construction site describing the crooked beams.

Some beams are mine.

Hand me the hammer.

I will probably hit my thumb.

Someone will point out I am holding the tool wrong.

Good.

Maybe they'll be right.

Maybe the wall will lean.

We can fix it.

That is what creation allows.

Something imperfect exists.

Now it can become better.

The critic in me can come along.

I need him.

He just doesn't get to drive every day.

Because eventually a person has to stop explaining what is wrong with the world long enough to place one imperfect brick into it.

And then another.

FOURTEEN: MY DRIVE TO MASTER MYSELF CAN EASILY CURDLE INTO THE DESIRE TO CONTROL OTHERS

Confession #14: Self-Discipline Becomes Dangerous the Moment I Assume Everyone Else Should Live by My Internal Rules

I admire discipline.

Probably too much.

Discipline has rescued me from laziness.

From distraction.

From appetite.

From excuses.

From moods.

It has helped me save money.

Train.

Coach.

Write.

Show up.

Finish things.

Keep promises.

Do what I said I would do after the emotion that made me say it disappeared.

I respect that.

I trust people who can govern themselves.

And because discipline has worked for me, I have sometimes made a dangerous mistake:

I have assumed that what helped me govern myself gave me the right to govern other people.

That is where self-mastery begins to curdle.

Not all at once.

Slowly.

Almost nobly.

I know what works.

I care about you.

I have experience.

I can see what you are not seeing.

So let me help.

Then:

You really should do this.

Then:

Why aren't you doing this?

Then:

I don't understand why you won't listen.

Then, if I am not careful:

Do what I am telling you.

Control rarely announces itself as control.

It arrives wearing concern.

That should frighten me.

Because I have spent much of my life trying to develop discipline in myself and others.

Athletes.

Children.

Family.

Teams.

Work.

The language sounds good.

Standards.

Accountability.

Preparation.

Consistency.

Responsibility.

All valuable.

But those same words can become a respectable vocabulary for domination.

That possibility belongs in the audit.

I think the confusion begins with a simple fact:

Self-discipline feels voluntary from inside.

I choose.

Wake up.

Work.

Train.

Save.

Prepare.

Do the hard thing.

That choice creates pride.

Maybe deserved pride.

But once I have made the choice repeatedly, I forget something.

It was mine.

My nervous system.

My history.

My values.

My fears.

My incentives.

My tolerance for discomfort.

My reasons.

Then I look at somebody else and ask:

Why don't you just do what I do?

Because he is not me.

Obvious.

Still easy to forget.

This is especially dangerous for coaches.

A coach survives certain experiences and turns survival into philosophy.

I did this.

This made me tougher.

Therefore it will make you tougher.

This motivated me.

Therefore it should motivate you.

This discipline worked for me.

Therefore your resistance means weakness.

That is an enormous leap.

Sometimes the lesson transfers.

Sometimes not.

Experience is evidence.

It is not universal law.

I have had to confront this with young players.

I played baseball with intensity.

Visible intensity.

Preparation mattered to me.

Competition mattered to me.

I liked urgency.

I did not need an adult to manufacture much of that internally.

So when I see a kid whose energy looks different, my first interpretation can become:

He doesn't care.

Chapter Eleven already caught me there.

But there is another layer.

If I believe caring should look like *my* caring, then coaching becomes conversion.

My job stops being helping him develop.

It becomes making him resemble me.

That is not development.

That is cloning with nicer language.

I do not want clones.

I say that confidently.

Then a player responds differently than I would.

Now we find out whether I mean it.

There is a strange seduction in being right about someone.

You see a pattern.

You warn them.

They ignore you.

Then exactly what you predicted happens.

Terrible event.

Wonderful feeling for the ego.

"I told you."

Few sentences reveal the corruption of care more quickly.

Supposedly I wanted to protect you.

Now you're hurt, and some part of me is enjoying being validated.

That is ugly.

Human.

Worth confronting.

I have felt versions of that.

Not always spoken.

Sometimes inside.

You should have listened.

Maybe true.

But what does that thought do now?

Help them?

Or restore my authority?

Those are different.

The desire to control often grows out of fear.

That may be the most important thing in this chapter.

I tell myself:

I want the best outcome.

Underneath:

I am afraid of the outcome I cannot control.

So I intervene.

Advise.

Push.

Remind.

Manage.

Monitor.

Correct.

The behavior may look like responsibility.

Sometimes it is.

But fear can imitate responsibility perfectly.

Parents know this better than anyone.

A child walks into risk.

Not reckless risk.

Normal life.

Relationships.

Work.

Money.

Career.

Marriage.

Travel.

Choices.

The parent sees possibilities the child does not.

Or believes he does.

Love says:

Help.

Fear says:

Control.

They speak with the same voice.

That is the problem.

How do I tell the difference?

I have started asking:

Am I trying to improve their decision, or eliminate my anxiety?

Sometimes both.

At least that answer is honest.

I think this is one of the hardest transformations in fatherhood.

When the child is small, control is partly responsibility.

Don't touch the stove.

Hold my hand crossing the street.

Go to bed.

Brush your teeth.

You cannot say:

I respect your autonomy regarding traffic.

That would be absurd.

Children need boundaries.

Authority.

Structure.

Then time moves.

The same child becomes capable of judgment.

Now the parent's job changes.

But internal habits do not automatically update.

The body remembers:

I protect.

I decide.

I know.

Then suddenly the person you spent years guiding says:

I'll decide.

Even if intellectually you know that is healthy, emotionally it can feel like insubordination.

That is dangerous.

If I do not update my role, love becomes occupation.

I continue governing territory that no longer belongs to me.

Advice becomes surveillance.

Concern becomes pressure.

Experience becomes veto power.

The parent-child relationship struggles because the parent is trying to preserve a job that development was supposed to eliminate.

That is one of the strangest paradoxes of successful parenting.

If you do it well, you lose authority.

On purpose.

I have said before that the best evidence I taught someone may be that they need me less.

This chapter makes that harder.

Because needing less from me means I control less.

And control is soothing.

Even when we pretend it isn't.

Control gives an illusion:

If I can influence enough variables, I can prevent pain.

Chapter Seven has already told me that is bullshit.

But fear is persistent.

So I may try anyway.

Choose this career.

Avoid this person.

Save this amount.

Don't buy that.

Take this job.

Don't move there.

Call me when you arrive.

Some guidance is loving.

Some is practical.

The question is whether disagreement remains allowed.

If the answer is no, the guidance has become rule.

This is true in marriage too.

You live with someone long enough and preferences quietly acquire moral status.

The dishwasher should be loaded this way.

Money should be spent this way.

The house should operate this way.

We should leave at this time.

We should handle conflict this way.

Maybe one person really is more efficient.

Congratulations.

Efficiency does not confer sovereignty.

I have had to learn that wanting something done a certain way and something objectively needing to be done that way are different categories.

That is a difficult discovery for people who are competent.

Competence can produce control addiction.

If my way works, why would we do it another way?

Because other people exist.

Annoying answer.

I think institutions develop the same problem.

A system discovers a procedure that works.

Then the procedure becomes policy.

Then policy becomes identity.

Then anyone questioning it is dangerous.

What began as useful structure becomes self-protection.

Organizations do this.

Families.

Baseball programs.

Governments.

Religions.

Businesses.

People.

The pattern is fractal.

Self-mastery itself can become an ideology.

Wake up early.

Exercise.

Eat well.

Save.

Read.

Meditate.

Plan.

Track.

Optimize.

There is an entire modern industry built around turning the human being into a dashboard.

Steps.

Calories.

Sleep score.

Productivity.

Net worth.

Body fat.

Heart rate.

Books read.

Hours worked.

Useful measurements.

Then the numbers begin issuing moral verdicts.

Good day.

Bad day.

Disciplined.

Lazy.

Successful.

Failing.

Now the person serves the system designed to serve the person.

That should sound familiar.

I like metrics.

That's why I need to watch them.

I like knowing.

How much?

How many?

What date?

What percentage?

Data calms uncertainty.

But life contains qualities numbers cannot settle.

Enough.

Joy.

Connection.

Meaning.

When is the workout serving health?

When is it serving fear?

When is financial discipline creating freedom?

When does it become an inability to spend?

When does preparation become obsession?

Metrics cannot answer alone.

I can control myself so aggressively that self-mastery becomes self-tyranny.

That is another version of this confession.

Wake up tired?

Doesn't matter.

Push.

Hungry?

Ignore it.

Emotional?

Suppress it.

Need rest?

Weakness.

There is a point where discipline stops listening to the organism.

Then control aimed inward becomes cruelty.

Chapter Sixteen is coming.

But the seed is here.

If I treat myself tyrannically, eventually I may expect everyone else to tolerate the same regime.

People often universalize the methods that made them successful.

Athletes do it.

Entrepreneurs.

Parents.

Coaches.

Recovering addicts.

Investors.

People who lost weight.

"I did this."

Good.

Then:

"This is what works."

Maybe.

Then:

"People who don't do this are making excuses."

Careful.

Personal experience is powerful because it is vivid.

It is also statistically tiny.

One life.

One body.

One context.

I can share a practice without turning it into a commandment.

That feels like a useful distinction.

This helped me.

Different from:

You need to do this.

The first offers.

The second prescribes.

Sometimes prescription is appropriate.

If I am a coach responsible for practice structure, I prescribe drills.

If I am a parent of a young child, I prescribe boundaries.

If I am an expert within legitimate authority, sometimes direct instruction is necessary.

The issue is not prescription itself.

It is whether authority is justified, limited, and open to revision.

I like authority more than I always admit.

There.

Another confession inside the confession.

Not power for spectacle.

But I like being responsible.

I like making decisions.

I like setting direction.

That can be useful.

Teams need leadership.

Families need decisions.

Businesses need owners willing to act.

But enjoying responsibility can quietly become enjoying control.

The line is thin.

Leadership says:

I will take responsibility for the decision.

Control says:

Therefore disagreement is disloyal.

Leadership says:

Here is the standard.

Control says:

Here is the standard, and questioning it threatens me.

Leadership says:

I need your input.

Control says:

I need your input until it contradicts my plan.

That last one is familiar.

I can invite pushback conceptually and still dislike receiving it.

That is why stated values mean very little until tested.

I want young players to ask questions.

Okay.

One asks:

"Why are we doing this drill?"

Do I hear curiosity?

Or disrespect?

The answer may depend less on his tone than on my mood.

That is frightening.

Authority filters evidence through emotion too.

If I am tired, insecure, pressed for time, his question may irritate me.

Now I teach him:

Question authority when authority is comfortable.

Excellent civic lesson.

Not what I intended.

Maybe leadership requires creating friction against my own mood.

If I want honest people around me, I need to make honesty survivable.

Not consequence-free.

Survivable.

Someone should be able to disagree without wondering whether the disagreement will become permanent character evidence.

That applies to a player.

A child.

A spouse.

An employee.

There is a phrase I use with kids:

Trust.

A team needs trust.

But trust cannot be demanded.

That is inconvenient.

"Trust me."

Why?

Because I'm the coach?

Position creates authority.

It does not automatically create trust.

Trust is earned behaviorally.

Consistency.

Fairness.

Listening.

Competence.

Owning mistakes.

Protecting people from humiliation.

Sometimes making decisions they dislike and explaining enough for them to know the decision was not arbitrary.

That takes time.

Control is faster.

Fear prefers control because trust contains risk.

If I trust you, you may disappoint me.

If I control you, maybe I can prevent it.

Except human beings resist control.

Then they either rebel or comply superficially.

Neither is trust.

This is one of the paradoxes of coaching.

The more control I need, the less independent the players become.

Then their dependence becomes evidence that I need more control.

Perfect system.

Coach calls every thought.

Every pitch.

Every positioning detail.

Every adjustment.

Players stop thinking.

Then coach says:

They don't think for themselves.

Who trained that?

Important question.

I have called pitches.

I believe in structure.

I am not rejecting that.

Young players benefit from guidance.

But if the long-term objective is autonomy, authority should have a developmental exit strategy.

Teach.

Model.

Prompt.

Then eventually reduce.

Otherwise the coach becomes indispensable at the exact moment he should be becoming less necessary.

Same as parenting.

Maybe every responsible authority should ask:

How am I preparing this person to function when I am gone?

That question changes leadership.

A controlling coach prepares the team to obey him.

A developmental coach prepares the team to understand the game.

A controlling parent prepares the child to seek permission.

A developmental parent prepares the child to make judgment.

A controlling leader centralizes knowledge.

A developmental leader creates successors.

Maybe the best use of authority is to make authority less necessary.

That is a humbling design.

The ego hates succession.

Someone else does it without me.

Chapter Nine again.

Spectacular insignificance.

These confessions overlap because ego keeps finding the same doors.

I think of dictators and authoritarian systems.

Chapter Fifteen will go directly there.

But I want to be careful not to make absurd comparisons.

A coach demanding punctuality is not a dictator.

A parent setting boundaries is not tyranny.

Scale matters.

Power matters.

Consequences matter.

Still, extreme systems often exaggerate ordinary human impulses.

Control.

Obedience.

Certainty.

Fear of dissent.

Centralization.

Punishment for deviation.

Those ingredients can appear in small harmless forms before becoming dangerous in larger ones.

I want to recognize the ingredient without equating the dish.

I have an internal authoritarian too.

He likes order.

He likes plans.

He likes people doing what they said they would do.

I don't want to kill him.

He is useful.

He gets things finished.

But he needs constitutional limits.

Maybe that is the metaphor.

Not elimination of authority.

Separation of powers.

Checks and balances inside the mind.

Discipline has a vote.

So does empathy.

Ambition has a vote.

So does rest.

Experience has a vote.

So does curiosity.

Fear can testify.

It does not get unilateral executive authority.

Ego can speak.

No veto.

That seems healthier.

A divided internal government may be inefficient.

Good.

Efficiency is overrated when the efficient thing is harmful.

Dictatorships can make decisions quickly.

That is not an argument for dictatorship.

Sometimes friction protects us.

Maybe psychological friction does too.

The pause before giving advice.

The question before punishment.

The second interpretation before judgment.

I have spent years trying to reduce hesitation.

Now I appreciate some forms of it.

There is another seductive idea inside self-mastery:

If I can control myself, I can control outcomes.

No.

I can influence them.

Big difference.

Self-discipline affects probabilities.

Chapter Seven.

But the world remains indifferent.

This matters because when disciplined behavior fails to produce the outcome I expected, I may increase control.

Work harder.

Push harder.

Tighten rules.

Maybe the failure was not insufficient discipline.

Maybe randomness happened.

Maybe the strategy was wrong.

Maybe another variable mattered.

If I respond to every disappointment by adding control, eventually everything becomes rigid.

I have seen this in sports.

Team loses.

More running.

More rules.

More yelling.

Why?

Because something must be done.

Maybe.

But action can become emotional relief for the coach.

We lost.

I feel powerless.

Make them run.

Now power restored.

That should be examined.

Conditioning may be appropriate.

Punishment may even be appropriate in some situations.

But if the primary purpose is regulating the adult's frustration, the kids are paying for the coach's nervous system.

That is wrong.

I've probably had moments closer to that than I like admitting.

Not extreme.

Enough to recognize the pattern.

The player makes a careless mistake.

I feel irritation.

My body wants immediate correction.

Maybe the best coaching decision is to wait thirty seconds.

But waiting makes me feel passive.

So I speak.

Maybe too much.

Control can be an inability to tolerate my own helplessness.

That is a major realization for me.

Can I watch someone make a mistake I predicted without making the mistake about me?

That is hard.

Especially someone I love.

A player.

A child.

Maybe the answer is sometimes no.

Intervene.

Protect.

But other times the mistake is theirs to own.

If I rescue them from every consequence, I may be controlling development itself.

We use the phrase:

Learn from your mistakes.

Then adults work tirelessly to prevent young people from having any.

Interesting.

There are mistakes I absolutely want to prevent.

Serious harm.

Permanent consequences.

But some errors are tuition.

Trying to eliminate all tuition may make the education impossible.

The hard part is knowing which errors are affordable.

No universal answer.

Again, judgment.

But the control impulse will always claim every possible failure is urgent.

Fear exaggerates cost.

That is why I need the audit.

My drive toward mastery also affects how I view people who are less disciplined.

I can become judgmental.

Why don't they save?

Why don't they exercise?

Why don't they prepare?

Why don't they read?

Maybe the criticism has merit.

But I have to remember that discipline itself is shaped by temperament, habit, environment, economic circumstances, stress, models, health, and reinforcement.

Agency remains.

Context remains.

Chapter Ten.

I do not need to choose one.

This does not mean expectations vanish.

I can expect effort from players.

Responsibility from adults.

Honesty from family.

Punctuality from employees.

But expectations should be connected to role and agreement.

Not merely to my preferences.

That is an important distinction.

"You should exercise because I do."

Weak.

"You committed to practice and your teammates depend on you."

Stronger.

The obligation comes from relationship and promise, not from my lifestyle.

I want to become better at asking:

Whose standard is this?

Mine?

The team's?

The contract's?

The law's?

The relationship's?

Reality's?

That question exposes hidden control quickly.

Suppose I value waking early.

Does my daughter have to?

No.

Suppose I value aggressive debt repayment.

Does everyone?

No.

Suppose I believe in intense preparation.

Can another person prepare differently and succeed?

Of course.

My preferences are not universal ethics.

I need to say that repeatedly because competent people are vulnerable to confusing them.

There is also a cultural element.

What one generation calls discipline another may experience as unnecessary rigidity.

Sometimes the younger generation is too soft.

Sometimes the older one is romanticizing unnecessary suffering.

Both happen.

"We had to do it."

Why is that automatically evidence they should?

Maybe the tradition built character.

Maybe it was simply bad design.

History deserves examination, not worship.

I have caught myself thinking:

Kids today.

Chapter Four already mocked that sentence.

But there is a real issue underneath.

Technology changed attention.

Parenting changed.

Sports changed.

Expectations changed.

Some older practices developed useful capacities.

Some caused harm.

The answer cannot be:

Everything old was better.

Or:

Everything old was oppressive.

Again, permanent tension.

My job as a coach is not to recreate 1985.

It is to develop children living in 2026.

That requires curiosity.

The discipline I learned in my environment may need translation.

Principle:

Preparation matters.

Method:

Maybe different.

Principle:

Accountability matters.

Method:

Maybe different.

Principle:

Team responsibility matters.

Method:

Maybe different.

If I become attached to method rather than principle, I will confuse nostalgia with standards.

That is a hard confession because nostalgia feels like evidence.

I remember how serious we were.

Do I?

Memory edits.

Chapter One.

Maybe we were disciplined.

Maybe we were also stupid in ways I conveniently misplaced.

Every generation remembers its toughness and forgets its nonsense.

I should not build policy from selective memory.

The will to power enters here.

I find the idea compelling because I believe people can shape themselves.

Overcome habits.

Develop capacities.

Become more than inherited impulses.

But the phrase becomes dangerous if I interpret my self-overcoming as moral superiority.

I mastered this appetite.

Why can't you?

Maybe you can.

Maybe not yet.

Maybe your battle is somewhere I am weak.

Human beings don't all fight on the same terrain.

The disciplined athlete may be emotionally avoidant.

The emotionally open person may struggle financially.

The brilliant thinker may be disorganized.

The organized person may be rigid.

Every strength casts shadows.

I cannot take the one area where I am strong and use it as the ruler for everybody else's character.

That is arrogance disguised as standards.

I want standards.

Very much.

This chapter is not an apology for having none.

A team without standards becomes chaos.

A family without boundaries can become unsafe.

A life without discipline becomes vulnerable to impulse.

The question is:

Are my standards serving the objective, or serving my need for control?

That may be the chapter's central question.

If a practice rule improves safety, learning, fairness, or team function, defend it.

If a rule exists because "that's how I like it," maybe say that.

Preferences are allowed.

Just don't turn them into moral truths.

There is dignity in saying:

"I prefer it this way."

No philosophical disguise required.

I have probably over-moralized preferences.

Most people do.

Punctuality is a good example.

I value being on time.

Sometimes being late is disrespectful.

Sometimes life happened.

But if someone is five minutes late, I can interpret an event as a statement:

You do not respect my time.

Maybe.

Or traffic.

Or poor planning.

Or different time norms.

Pattern matters.

Context matters.

I do not need to remove standards to remain curious.

Control hates context because context complicates enforcement.

A rule is easier:

Late equals disrespect.

Clean.

Simple.

Often wrong.

Nuance makes leadership harder.

Still worth it.

I also need to distinguish control from boundaries.

People confuse them.

Control says:

You must behave this way.

Boundary says:

If this happens, here is what I will do.

Important difference.

I cannot force another adult to behave as I want.

I can decide what I participate in.

That is self-mastery.

Control moves outward.

Boundary stays anchored inward.

I like that distinction.

A parent of an adult child cannot say:

You are not allowed to make that decision.

Well, they can say it.

Reality may disagree.

They can say:

I love you. I think the decision is a mistake. Here is what I can and cannot support.

Different.

More honest about power.

A coach has legitimate authority within the team.

Still boundaries matter.

"If you miss practice without communicating, you may not start."

Clear.

Connected consequence.

Different from:

"You disappointed me and now I'm going to make sure you feel it."

One is structure.

The other is emotional control.

I want to become better at distinguishing those.

Because emotion can contaminate legitimate authority.

A consequence may be appropriate and still delivered vindictively.

The rule can be fair.

My pleasure in enforcing it may not be.

Another uncomfortable audit.

Do I ever enjoy being proven right after warning someone?

Yes.

Do I ever enjoy a consequence confirming my standard?

Probably.

That doesn't automatically invalidate the consequence.

It does mean ego is present.

Notice.

Do not let it write the sentence.

There is a form of control embedded in unsolicited advice.

I have given plenty.

Advice feels generous.

Sometimes it is.

But unsolicited advice can contain a hidden message:

I am uncomfortable watching you run your own life.

That is different.

The advice may even be excellent.

Still intrusive.

I have learned to appreciate one question:

Do you want my thoughts?

Simple.

I should use it more.

It returns agency.

Maybe the person says yes.

Great.

Maybe no.

Can I tolerate no?

There is the test.

If rejection irritates me, perhaps the advice was not entirely about them.

This matters with my daughter especially as adulthood changes the relationship.

There will always be things I see.

Patterns.

Risks.

Possibilities.

I have experience she does not.

She also has information I do not.

Her life.

Her workplace.

Her generation.

Her relationships.

Her interior world.

Experience should make me available.

Not omniscient.

That is the role I want.

Available.

Not hovering.

Available is a beautiful word.

Control needs proximity.

Availability permits distance.

I'm here.

Not:

I'm here whether you asked or not.

Different forms of love.

The same with players.

I want them knowing:

Coach can help.

Not:

Coach must approve every decision.

If I can move from control toward availability over time, maybe development is working.

Self-mastery should create freedom.

Mine first.

If discipline makes me more rigid, anxious, judgmental, and controlling, perhaps I am mastering the wrong thing.

The objective is not absolute control over impulse.

The objective is increased capacity to choose.

That feels important.

Discipline expands choice.

Addiction narrows it.

Fear narrows it.

Ego narrows it.

A good discipline should make more responses available.

Not reduce me to one.

Take exercise.

If I can exercise only when conditions are perfect, low freedom.

If I can train despite mood, more freedom.

But if I cannot rest without guilt, freedom has narrowed again.

Interesting.

The disciplined person may become enslaved to discipline.

That is not mastery.

That is a different master.

Take money.

If I cannot save, impulse controls me.

Learn to save.

More freedom.

But if I cannot spend on something meaningful because seeing the account balance decline creates panic, money now controls me from the other direction.

Again, the virtue overshoots.

The pendulum.

Take food.

If I cannot resist appetite, low control.

Develop structure.

Good.

If the structure becomes obsession and every deviation produces shame, control has become captivity.

The point is not maximum restriction.

It is maximum agency.

That may be one definition of self-mastery I can trust.

Can I choose rather than compulsively obey either impulse or rule?

That is power.

Maybe the will to power is not:

Make yourself obey.

Maybe:

Increase the range of conscious action available to you.

I like that interpretation.

It is less authoritarian.

More developmental.

That framework changes coaching too.

The goal is not producing a player who obeys instructions perfectly.

It is expanding his choices.

He recognizes situations.

Adjusts.

Regulates emotion.

Understands his body.

Sees the game.

Now he can choose effectively.

That is real baseball intelligence.

It cannot be created through permanent external control.

Eventually decision-making must migrate inward.

The same is true for a child becoming an adult.

And maybe a citizen.

A healthy society should not require someone to be watched constantly to behave responsibly.

External authority has limits.

Character begins when the umpire is gone.

Quiet unseen moments.

Again.

I keep returning to those words because they contain self-governance.

What do you do when nobody is watching?

Not because punishment is coming.

Not because praise is coming.

Because you chose a standard.

That is different from obedience.

I want that.

For myself.

For players.

For people I love.

But I cannot force self-governance into existence.

That would defeat the concept.

I can model.

Teach.

Set boundaries.

Create consequences.

Then release.

That last verb is the hardest.

Release.

There is power in holding.

Maybe greater power in knowing when to let go.

A baseball throw teaches that.

Grip forever and the ball goes nowhere.

At some point force becomes useful only through release.

Maybe authority works the same way.

There are things I do control.

My effort.

Some of my habits.

My words, imperfectly.

My money decisions, within circumstances.

Where I place attention.

Whether I apologize.

Whether I investigate fear.

Whether I seek help.

Even these aren't absolute.

Biology, circumstance, habit all shape capacity.

But the radius is real.

That is enough territory.

Why am I constantly trying to annex someone else's?

Good question.

Maybe because my own territory is harder.

If I cannot make myself peaceful, perhaps I can make everyone else behave in ways that reduce my anxiety.

If I cannot tolerate uncertainty, I can demand predictability.

If I cannot regulate disappointment, I can demand perfection.

If I cannot tolerate disagreement, I can demand loyalty.

Control of others often compensates for poor control of self.

That should be written carefully.

Not always.

But often enough to frighten me.

The coach screaming for composure may be the least composed person on the field.

The parent demanding emotional regulation may be emotionally dysregulated.

The leader demanding loyalty may be terrified of dissent.

The husband demanding respect may feel insecure.

The writer demanding recognition may doubt his own worth.

External command can reveal internal fragility.

Again:

Sometimes.

No universal formula.

Still useful.

So when I feel the urge to control, I want to ask:

What feeling am I trying not to have?

Fear?

Helplessness?

Embarrassment?

Uncertainty?

Irrelevance?

That question turns the camera around.

Chapter Eleven.

Perhaps this is the dividing line between mastery and domination.

Mastery turns inward first.

Domination turns outward first.

Self-mastery says:

I need to regulate my response to your choice.

Domination says:

I need to regulate your choice so I do not have to regulate my response.

That is worth remembering.

Of course there are circumstances where I must influence another person's choice.

A child running into traffic.

A player violating a safety rule.

An employee endangering people.

Authority exists for reasons.

But the exception should not become psychological default.

Most disagreements are not traffic.

Even when my nervous system acts like they are.

This is especially important as I age.

Experience accumulates.

So does the temptation to prescribe.

I've seen this before.

Maybe.

But every younger person's life is not a rerun of mine.

History rhymes.

It does not photocopy.

I need to offer experience with an open hand.

Not a closed fist.

An open hand can still hold something valuable.

Here is what I learned.

Take what is useful.

Question the rest.

That is how I want my writing understood too.

This book is not nineteen laws.

They are confessions.

My observations.

My errors.

If someone reads Chapter Fourteen and says:

Jose's solution does not work for me—

good.

Maybe they're right.

The book should not become another control mechanism.

That would be a spectacular failure of the thesis.

Even the phrase **How To Get Better** contains danger.

Who am I telling how?

Maybe the title should always be read with an invisible subtitle:

How I Am Trying to Get Better, in Case Any of It Helps You Examine Yourself.

Less marketable.

More honest.

There is also generosity in letting people learn differently.

I can tell someone the stove is hot.

Maybe they still need to feel heat.

Not every lesson.

Again, serious consequences matter.

But some understanding cannot be transferred cleanly.

I have paid tuition for lessons my daughter may still need to pay again.

That irritates the efficient part of me.

We already bought this course!

Human development does not accept transferable credits reliably.

Same with players.

I can tell a shortstop a thousand times:

Get around the ball.

Then one day he does it and feels why.

Now knowledge changes categories.

Embodied.

His.

My explanation helped perhaps.

Maybe not.

But I cannot feel it for him.

That is the limit of teaching.

And control.

A good teacher eventually accepts the learner's ownership.

A bad teacher needs permanent authorship.

I want the first.

There is something paradoxical about influence.

The more desperately I try to influence someone, the less receptive they may become.

Human beings protect autonomy.

Push hard.

Resistance increases.

Then I push harder because resistance appears to prove they need more pressure.

Terrible loop.

Sometimes less control creates more influence.

Ask.

Listen.

Wait.

Offer.

Let them choose.

Hard for an intense person.

Hello, Jose.

Intensity is not the enemy.

I don't want this book slowly turning me into fog.

I like caring deeply.

I like standards.

I like passion.

I like decisive action.

The objective isn't neutering intensity.

It is decoupling intensity from ownership of other people.

I can care fiercely without controlling.

That may be one of the deepest skills I still need to develop.

Care fiercely. Hold lightly.

I like that.

Maybe that belongs on the wall beside **NOW WHAT?**

Care fiercely.

Hold lightly.

Prepare intensely.

Accept uncertainty.

Teach clearly.

Release ownership.

Love deeply.

Permit autonomy.

Those pairs describe the adult I want to become.

Will I?

Sometimes.

Other times I will explain too much.

Give advice too quickly.

Become anxious.

Try to control.

The point isn't believing this chapter cures anything.

It simply gives the pattern a name.

Naming is not mastery.

Chapter Two.

Behavior next.

So perhaps I need practical tests.

Before I give advice:

Was I asked?

If not, is there meaningful danger or legitimate responsibility requiring me to speak?

Before I set a rule:

What objective does it serve?

Before I impose a consequence:

Is this proportional, predictable, and connected to behavior?

Before I correct:

Am I teaching or discharging frustration?

Before I insist:

Is this principle or preference?

Before I intervene:

Am I preventing unacceptable harm or preventing tolerable learning?

Before I say "you need to":

Do they?

Or do I need them to?

Those questions could save me from myself.

Not always.

Often enough.

Maybe the tyrant begins with an unexamined sentence:

I know what's best for you.

Sometimes a parent does.

Sometimes a coach.

Sometimes a doctor.

Sometimes government.

Sometimes nobody does.

The power of that sentence should demand evidence.

And limits.

Because history is full of people whose certainty about what was best for others created suffering.

Again, scale matters.

But the psychological warning is universal.

I want to become suspicious of benevolent control.

Especially mine.

Cruel control is easy to recognize.

Benevolent control looks beautiful.

I'm only doing this because I care.

Maybe.

Still ask:

Do they have room to say no?

Consent is not relevant to every authority relationship.

A child cannot veto every boundary.

A player cannot negotiate every team rule.

But the general principle matters as people gain capacity.

Authority should track responsibility.

More capacity.

More autonomy.

If authority refuses to shrink as capacity grows, something other than care may be operating.

That is a difficult truth for institutions too.

Organizations accumulate rules.

Rarely remove them.

Each rule once solved something.

Soon the structure becomes heavier than the problem.

Control has inertia.

So do people.

I should periodically ask which internal rules no longer serve me.

Must wake at this time.

Must handle money this way.

Must respond immediately.

Must be useful.

Must know.

Must fix.

Who wrote these?

When?

Still necessary?

Maybe self-mastery includes repealing outdated laws.

I like that metaphor.

Internal constitution.

Some amendments needed.

There is a younger Jose who needed certain rules.

Rules helped build him.

Maybe older Jose needs flexibility.

That does not make the old discipline wrong.

It means development changed the problem.

The training wheels were useful.

Keeping them forever would become absurd.

Maybe some identities are training wheels too.

Coach.

Provider.

Problem solver.

Expert.

Father who protects.

Those roles served.

They may need revision as life changes.

If I cling, control grows.

If I adapt, maybe relationship grows.

That is the choice.

The hardest person to release may be myself.

The version I worked hard to become.

If self-mastery becomes attachment to a mastered identity, growth stops.

I mastered this.

Great.

Now maybe the next task is letting it go.

That feels very different from power.

Maybe it is power.

I think of holding a baseball.

Grip matters.

Too loose, no control.

Too tight, no fluidity.

Every pitcher learns that tension can destroy the very command he is trying to create.

The harder you squeeze, the less freely the ball leaves.

What a beautiful contradiction.

Control requires grip.

Too much grip destroys control.

That might be this entire chapter in one image.

I have squeezed too tightly at times.

People.

Outcomes.

Plans.

Standards.

My own identity.

The grip came from caring.

And fear.

Both.

I don't need to condemn the hand.

Just loosen it.

That is Confession Number Fourteen.

I love discipline.

I love preparation.

I believe in self-mastery.

I believe human beings can strengthen character through repeated choices.

And I know that these beliefs can become dangerous inside me.

I can turn personal discipline into moral superiority.

I can turn experience into prescription.

I can turn leadership into control.

I can turn coaching into cloning.

I can turn protection into interference.

I can turn love into ownership.

I can turn concern into anxiety management.

I can impose my rules on someone else and still tell myself I am helping.

That is precisely why I need to watch it.

The objective is not abandoning power.

It is relocating it.

Less power over you.

More power over my need to control you.

Less demand that the world conform to my internal order.

More capacity to remain regulated when it doesn't.

Less:

Do what I say so I can feel safe.

More:

I can tolerate your autonomy even when it scares me.

That is harder.

Which probably means it is closer to the work.

If I am fortunate, my daughter will make choices I would never make.

If I am fortunate, players I coach will develop ideas I never taught.

If I am fortunate, someone will read this book and reject part of it intelligently.

If I am fortunate, people around me will become less dependent on my approval.

Those things may occasionally hurt.

Good.

Maybe that's evidence that life around me has not become a cult of my preferences.

I don't want obedience as my legacy.

I want discernment.

I don't want people saying:

Jose told me what to think.

I'd rather:

Jose made me ask myself why I think what I think.

Then they can disagree.

That would be success.

And also a loss of control.

Perfect.

The next chapter turns toward tyranny.

But tyranny does not begin only in governments.

That is too comfortable.

The seed can begin much closer.

In the tiny internal voice that says:

I know.

I am right.

You should listen.

Your resistance is the problem.

Maybe sometimes that voice is correct.

That is what makes it dangerous.

The task is not silencing authority.

It is forcing authority—especially mine—to remain accountable.

Because the moment my desire to master myself becomes justification for mastering you, the philosophy has betrayed itself.

And the first person I need to take power away from is me.

FIFTEEN: DISALLOWING TYRANNY STARTS BY DISARMING THE TYRANT IN MY OWN MIND

Confession #15: I Am Most Vulnerable to Tyranny When I Am Certain That My Motives Are Pure

I used to think tyranny belonged to history books.

Dictators.

Generals.

Secret police.

Censorship.

Prisons.

Propaganda.

Men in uniforms standing on balconies.

Large machinery.

Visible machinery.

Terrible machinery.

And because the machinery was so large, it was comforting.

I could point to it.

Condemn it.

Separate myself from it.

That is tyranny.

Over there.

Not here.

Certainly not in me.

Then I started paying closer attention to the smaller machinery.

The sentence before the censorship.

The emotion before the punishment.

The certainty before the cruelty.

The resentment before the dehumanization.

The desire for order before the demand for obedience.

The fear before the strongman.

And an uncomfortable possibility appeared:

Maybe tyranny is not first a political structure. Maybe it is a human temptation that political structures learn to scale.

That does not make my impatience equivalent to dictatorship.

Scale matters.

Power matters.

Consequences matter.

I am not interested in cheapening history by comparing a coach's bad afternoon to an atrocity.

That would be intellectually dishonest.

But if I only study tyranny at its most monstrous size, I may miss the ordinary psychological ingredients from which larger abuses can be assembled.

That is the confession.

I know where tyranny ends.

I am less certain I always recognize where it begins.

Especially when it begins inside me.

The internal tyrant is not dramatic.

Mine does not wear boots.

He wears reasonable shoes.

He has experience.

He has standards.

He likes punctuality.

Preparation.

Order.

Accountability.

He is often correct.

That is what makes him dangerous.

He does not say:

I want power.

He says:

Somebody has to be responsible.

He does not say:

Silence disagreement.

He says:

We don't have time for this right now.

He does not say:

Humiliate the kid.

He says:

He needs to learn.

He does not say:

Control your daughter.

He says:

You're only trying to protect her.

He does not say:

Your opinion matters more because it is yours.

He says:

You have more experience.

All potentially true.

And truth can be tyranny's best camouflage when truth is used without restraint.

I am fascinated by dictators because I am less fascinated by believing they were born as a separate species.

Monster.

Different category.

Not us.

I understand why we want that.

If the tyrant is fundamentally unlike me, then history becomes safer.

The lesson is simple:

Avoid people like him.

But what if the more disturbing lesson is that ordinary human drives can become monstrous when combined with fear, power, grievance, ideology, obedience, and lack of restraint?

Then history stops being a museum.

It becomes a mirror.

Cracked, of course.

Always cracked.

I want to be careful.

There are people whose conduct is so brutal that ordinary moral language feels insufficient.

Mass murder.

Torture.

Ethnic cleansing.

Systematic persecution.

Those things deserve names and judgment.

Humanizing perpetrators does not reduce responsibility.

Understanding the mechanisms of cruelty does not excuse cruelty.

In fact, I think pretending perpetrators are incomprehensible monsters can make future cruelty harder to recognize.

Because the next person may not look monstrous.

He may look ordinary.

Reasonable.

Afraid.

Patriotic.

Humiliated.

Angry.

Certain.

Certainty again.

It keeps showing up.

Maybe certainty is not inherently dangerous.

I am certain my daughter deserves dignity.

Certain enough that I am comfortable writing it.

I am certain children should not be abused.

Some moral claims require firmness.

But certainty becomes dangerous when it convinces me that my goodness deserves an exemption from scrutiny.

My cause is good.

Therefore my methods must be good.

That is the slide.

I see small versions of it everywhere.

The parent says:

I love my child.

Therefore my intervention is loving.

No.

The first claim does not prove the second.

The coach says:

I care about development.

Therefore my method develops.

No.

The politician says:

I am protecting democracy.

Therefore whatever I do to my opponents protects democracy.

Danger.

The activist says:

Our cause is just.

Therefore anyone questioning tactics must oppose justice.

Danger.

The business owner says:

I am protecting the company.

Therefore employees must accept whatever I demand.

Danger.

Good objectives deserve scrutiny precisely because moral confidence loosens restraints.

This is one of the most uncomfortable things I have learned about myself.

When I know I am wrong, I become careful.

When I know I am right, I can become a pain in the ass.

Less listening.

More explaining.

More interruption.

More certainty about motives.

More willingness to push.

Because why wouldn't I?

I'm right.

There is the seed.

Tiny.

Ordinary.

Nothing historic about it.

Still worth disarming.

Maybe every internal tyrant begins with an inability to tolerate resistance.

Resistance feels offensive.

I explained this.

Why aren't you doing it?

I gave you good advice.

Why aren't you listening?

The rule is reasonable.

Why are you questioning it?

I am trying to help.

Why aren't you grateful?

That last one is particularly revealing.

Gratitude demanded is not gratitude.

It is tribute.

Authority becomes dangerous when it interprets disagreement as moral failure.

A player questions a coaching decision.

Maybe disrespectful.

Maybe thoughtful.

If I automatically place him in the first category, authority has become self-protective.

My daughter disagrees with my advice.

If I interpret disagreement as immaturity merely because she did not reach my conclusion, I have protected my status by diminishing her judgment.

A spouse disagrees.

If I need agreement to feel respected, I have converted love into hierarchy.

These are not tyranny in the political sense.

But the internal mechanics rhyme.

The tyrant in my mind likes hierarchy.

He likes knowing who decides.

That can be useful.

A baseball game requires roles.

A coach cannot conduct a referendum before every pitching change.

A child cannot decide every household rule.

A workplace needs accountability.

Structure is not tyranny.

That distinction matters.

The question is whether hierarchy serves the task or the ego of the person on top.

I think of a dugout.

There are moments when the coach must say:

This is what we're doing.

No vote.

Good.

But if every question is treated as threat, then structure has become brittle.

A confident system can tolerate some dissent.

A fragile one needs silence.

That may be true of people too.

How much dissent can I tolerate before I feel personally challenged?

That is a useful measure of internal security.

Not infinite dissent.

Disruptive behavior exists.

Bad-faith actors exist.

A team cannot function if every instruction becomes a debate.

But if nobody can question me at all, I have learned nothing about leadership except that power can enforce quiet.

Quiet is not the same as agreement.

Chapter One.

Same nod.

Different reality.

This is why tyrannies obsess over outward compliance.

Flags.

Slogans.

Uniformity.

Public agreement.

The inner belief is harder to control.

So the system starts regulating visible behavior.

Say this.

Don't say that.

Attend.

Applaud.

Repeat.

The ritual becomes evidence of loyalty.

Small groups do similar things.

Families.

Teams.

Organizations.

Friend groups.

Political tribes.

Every group develops signals.

The danger begins when refusing the signal makes the person suspect.

I have participated in that instinct.

We all have.

Someone doesn't react emotionally the way I expect.

Do you even care?

Maybe.

Maybe deeply.

The demand is not merely:

Care.

It is:

Perform caring in the form I recognize.

That is control of expression.

Important distinction.

I think masculinity sometimes teaches this from the other direction.

Do not perform fear.

Do not perform vulnerability.

Certain emotional expressions become violations.

Boys learn hierarchy through emotion.

Some feelings are allowed.

Others punished socially.

Again, no dictator required.

Culture regulates.

Sometimes culture teaches useful restraint.

Sometimes it amputates parts of a person.

The line deserves investigation.

Every human group needs norms.

That is unavoidable.

The question is whether norms remain open to examination.

Once a norm becomes sacred solely because it is ours, the group begins protecting identity instead of purpose.

"We've always done it this way."

One of history's most expensive sentences.

I have used versions.

This is how baseball is played.

This is how kids learn.

Maybe.

Prove it.

Or at least remain open to examining it.

Tradition contains accumulated wisdom.

It also contains accumulated mistakes.

Discarding everything old is foolish.

Worshiping everything old is equally foolish.

Again, both.

The internal tyrant hates "both."

Both reduces executive power.

He wants a clean rule.

If this, then that.

No negotiation.

Rules reduce anxiety.

They also reduce judgment.

Sometimes that is the point.

We need rules because human judgment is inconsistent.

But rigid rules can produce absurdity when context changes.

So healthy systems need both rules and discretion.

Then discretion needs accountability.

Nothing simple survives.

Good.

I think tyranny flourishes partly because complexity exhausts people.

People want order.

That desire is understandable.

Chaos is frightening.

Crime.

Economic instability.

War.

Cultural change.

Humiliation.

When people feel events slipping beyond control, someone offering certainty becomes attractive.

I alone can fix it.

Simple.

Powerful.

Dangerous.

But before judging people who follow such figures, I should ask where I seek similar emotional relief.

Not political equivalence.

Psychological recognition.

When my own life feels uncertain, do I tighten?

More rules.

More advice.

More planning.

More attempts to manage variables.

Same impulse in miniature:

Make the uncertainty stop.

Chapter Fourteen exposed control as fear management.

Tyranny is control given moral and institutional permission.

That is why fear matters politically.

A frightened population may surrender freedoms it would defend while calm.

A frightened person may surrender internal freedoms too.

Curiosity.

Patience.

Empathy.

Fear narrows.

The other person becomes threat.

Threat justifies action.

Dehumanization often begins linguistically.

Those people.

Always.

Never.

Animals.

Parasites.

Traitors.

Idiots.

Criminals.

Whatever category permits us to stop seeing individual faces.

Language is a cracked mirror and sometimes a weapon.

If I reduce you enough, mistreating you becomes psychologically easier.

That is true at historical scale.

It is also true in ordinary conflict.

Have I ever reduced a person to a label?

Of course.

Lazy.

Arrogant.

Crazy.

Entitled.

Difficult.

Now I don't have to encounter the full person.

I have diagnosis.

Maybe accurate in part.

Still reduction.

A label compresses complexity.

Sometimes necessary for communication.

Dangerous when the label becomes permission.

A kid becomes:

Lazy.

Now every behavior confirms laziness.

He arrives early once?

Exception.

Arrives late?

Evidence.

The label becomes unfalsifiable.

Popper would have a field day.

And the coach stops seeing.

That is a small authoritarian move.

Reality must now conform to the judgment.

Evidence against the judgment gets discarded.

I have done milder versions of this.

We all do.

A person disappoints me.

I build theory.

They're selfish.

Then I start collecting proof.

Chapter Two's defense attorney has changed jobs.

Now he prosecutes others.

Very efficient legal system.

Tyranny depends on asymmetrical evidence.

Evidence supporting authority matters.

Evidence contradicting authority becomes suspicious.

Political tyrannies do this overtly.

But internal tyrannies do it too.

I said I'm disciplined.

Therefore moments of indiscipline receive explanation.

I said he's irresponsible.

Therefore his responsible actions receive exceptions.

My identity and my judgments both get protected.

That is intellectual authoritarianism.

Maybe self-confrontation is democracy inside the mind.

That metaphor interests me.

Competing voices.

Evidence.

Appeal.

Checks and balances.

No single impulse holds permanent power.

Fear speaks.

Ego speaks.

Compassion speaks.

Experience speaks.

Desire speaks.

Reason speaks.

Body speaks.

None becomes dictator.

Messy.

Slow.

Sometimes inefficient.

But less likely to let one frightened impulse rewrite the constitution.

Of course democracies can be dysfunctional.

So can introspection.

Too many voices can produce paralysis.

At some point a decision is required.

The difference is that authority remains provisional.

I decide.

Then evidence can reopen the case.

That is very different from:

I decided, therefore dissent is illegitimate.

I want my coaching to work this way.

Set standards.

Make decisions.

Own them.

But permit feedback.

If evidence shows a method is failing, change.

No shame.

The objective is development, not preservation of Coach Jose's intellectual authority.

Simple to write.

Harder when you've invested years in an idea.

People defend institutions partly because criticism of the institution feels like criticism of them.

Same identity fusion.

I built this program.

I raised this family.

I created this company.

I developed this philosophy.

Therefore:

Criticize the thing and you criticize me.

Now reform becomes humiliation.

The creator from Chapter Thirteen must learn to let creation change.

Otherwise creator becomes ruler.

Tyranny also loves moral purity.

Pure people.

Pure causes.

Pure ideology.

Pure nation.

Pure tribe.

Purity is dangerous because human beings are mixed.

Chapter Eleven.

Once purity becomes the standard, somebody has to identify contamination.

Then exclusion begins.

Sometimes metaphorically.

Historically, sometimes catastrophically.

I am wary of any worldview requiring perfect ideological cleanliness.

Humans are contradictory creatures.

A system unable to tolerate contradiction eventually has to silence humans.

I see tiny cultural versions online.

One wrong sentence from ten years ago.

Now the whole person is reclassified.

Again, accountability matters.

Some actions deserve serious consequences.

But a culture incapable of distinguishing behavior from permanent essence begins creating incentives for concealment, not growth.

If confession equals execution, people stop confessing.

The internal audit dies.

That matters to this book.

Why admit a flaw?

Because I believe flaws can be confronted.

If I believed every confession permanently proved moral unworthiness, writing nineteen would be absurd.

Self-confrontation requires a concept of revision.

Not erasure.

Revision.

The old paragraph remains in the manuscript.

You write the next one differently.

A tyrant cannot admit error easily because authority depends on infallibility.

This is another warning for me.

How hard is it for me to say to a player:

I was wrong.

Or to my daughter.

My wife.

Someone younger.

The more authority I have in the relationship, the more important the apology becomes.

Because if authority never admits mistakes, everybody below learns that truth flows only downward.

I remember coaches from older generations where the coach simply could not be wrong.

If practice failed, players failed.

If communication failed, players weren't listening.

If the team tightened up, players lacked toughness.

Maybe sometimes.

But a theory explaining every failure by blaming the people below cannot learn.

It is unfalsifiable leadership.

That is dangerous.

I do not want that.

If every coaching outcome confirms my philosophy, I am no longer coaching.

I am running a religion.

Again, nobody needs that.

This applies to parenting too.

If the child succeeds:

Good parenting.

If the child struggles:

Bad influences.

If the child agrees:

Mature.

If she disagrees:

Too young to understand.

Wonderful theory.

Parent always wins.

That should make any parent nervous.

I want my daughter to be capable of saying:

Dad, I think you're projecting.

And maybe she's wrong.

But if the sentence itself becomes prohibited, I've failed something larger than the immediate issue.

I want relationship strong enough for disagreement.

That means giving up the comfort of unquestioned authority.

Good.

Tyranny also begins when ends justify means.

I have touched this repeatedly.

I want the player mentally tougher.

So humiliation becomes acceptable.

No.

I want my child financially safe.

So manipulation becomes acceptable.

No.

I want my political side to win because the other side is dangerous.

So dishonesty becomes acceptable.

Careful.

Once methods lose independent moral evaluation, the cause becomes a solvent.

It dissolves restraint.

People sometimes defend ugly behavior with:

You don't understand what is at stake.

Maybe the stakes are enormous.

That can matter.

Emergency conditions change moral calculations.

But "stakes" can become an infinite permission slip.

Every tribe believes its moment is existential.

If everything is existential, anything becomes justified.

That is how guardrails disappear.

I have to watch the smaller version.

This game matters.

Does it?

Enough to humiliate a kid?

No.

This financial decision matters.

Enough to control an adult daughter?

No.

This argument matters.

Enough to use a vulnerability against someone?

No.

Proportion again.

Character lives partly in refusing to inflate stakes until bad behavior looks necessary.

Baseball helps here because adults routinely turn children's games into existential events.

Tournament.

Championship.

Showcase.

Recruiting.

Big game.

The stakes feel enormous.

Then somebody is yelling at a twelve-year-old.

Step back.

Zoom out.

Chapter Nine.

It's baseball.

Wonderful baseball.

Important to the kid.

Worth caring about.

Still baseball.

Perspective is a guardrail against tyranny.

I think humor helps too.

Authoritarian personalities rarely enjoy being laughed at.

Ego hates deflation.

Maybe I need people around me who can puncture seriousness.

If I am delivering a dramatic speech and a kid asks whether practice is almost over, perhaps reality has sent an emissary.

Listen.

The internal tyrant also hates rest.

Rest cannot be controlled easily because rest does not perform.

What did you accomplish?

Nothing.

Dangerous.

Self-worth tied to productivity creates internal authoritarianism.

Work.

Produce.

Improve.

Optimize.

How To Get Better itself could become tyrannical.

Always better.

Never enough.

That is not the book I want.

Maybe there are days when getting better means refusing improvement.

Rest.

Enjoy.

Stop auditing.

Eat dinner.

Watch the game.

Call somebody.

Do nothing useful.

If improvement becomes another dictator, I have recreated the problem under a beautiful title.

That possibility matters.

The will to power can curdle into war against oneself.

Master every weakness.

Control every impulse.

Eliminate contradiction.

No.

Humanity cannot be conquered into health.

I don't think so, anyway.

Maybe integration matters more than annihilation.

Fear does not need execution.

It needs proper jurisdiction.

Ego does not need elimination.

It needs limits.

Anger has uses.

Desire has uses.

Even pride.

The task resembles governance.

Channel power.

Don't pretend power disappears.

I like constitutional thinking here.

Certain internal rights should remain protected.

The right to revise.

The right to rest.

The right to feel fear.

The right to change my mind.

The right to be imperfect without declaring the project failed.

And certain powers need limits.

Ego cannot define reality alone.

Fear cannot make every decision.

Anger cannot impose every sentence.

Certainty does not get to silence curiosity.

Maybe that's my internal Bill of Rights.

There is something liberating about admitting the tyrant exists.

Denial gives him secrecy.

Recognition gives me options.

I can hear:

Make him understand.

And answer:

Why?

I can hear:

She should listen to you.

And ask:

Must she?

I can hear:

Punish this.

And ask:

What outcome am I trying to create?

I can hear:

You are right.

And answer:

Maybe.

That one word—maybe—can be revolutionary inside certainty.

I do not want "maybe" everywhere.

A man must sometimes say no clearly.

There are boundaries that should not wobble.

No abuse.

No humiliation as entertainment.

No dishonesty where trust requires truth.

No cruelty disguised as discipline.

The internal democracy still needs constitutional protections.

Nuance does not mean everything negotiable.

But even firm boundaries should know their rationale.

Otherwise rule becomes superstition.

I think tyranny is ultimately about denying another person's subjectivity.

You become object.

Instrument.

Obstacle.

Follower.

Category.

Means to my end.

I stop asking what your experience is because my interpretation is enough.

That can happen politically.

It can happen in a family.

In a dugout.

In an argument.

Again, scales differ radically.

The human mechanism is worth noticing.

The antidote may begin with one question:

What does this look like from where you are standing?

Not:

What excuse do you have?

Not:

Convince me.

Just:

What do you see?

That question restores personhood.

Maybe I still disagree.

Maybe the consequence remains.

But you are no longer merely an object inside my story.

I want that in coaching.

A kid makes a mistake.

What did you see?

Maybe his answer reveals something.

Maybe he says:

I don't know.

Fine.

But I invite his consciousness into the analysis.

That matters.

He is learning to coach himself.

Authority shares interpretation.

Eventually autonomy grows.

A tyrant tells you what you experienced.

A teacher asks.

I want to remember that.

This has implications for politics too, but I resist pretending political problems can be solved by interpersonal empathy alone.

Power structures matter.

Law matters.

Institutions matter.

Sometimes people knowingly exploit others.

Understanding does not replace resistance.

But resistance without understanding can misidentify causes.

We need structural thinking and human thinking.

Both.

Always annoying.

Always necessary.

I think societies protect themselves from tyranny partly through institutions designed around distrust.

That sounds cynical.

Maybe it's realistic.

Checks and balances assume good intentions are insufficient.

No person gets unlimited power merely because he promises to use it wisely.

That principle should probably govern my own life.

Do not trust the purity of your intention.

Build checks.

Ask people.

Invite dissent.

Pause.

Separate preference from principle.

Measure impact.

Apologize.

These are checks and balances.

This book itself can be one.

Writing down the confession makes it harder to pretend I never saw the pattern.

Not impossible.

Humans are talented.

Still.

Evidence.

I wonder whether power reveals character or changes it.

Probably both.

A person gets authority.

Traits previously constrained now have room.

Also incentives change.

People treat you differently.

Fewer people correct you.

More people laugh at your jokes.

Dangerous.

Maybe the greatest privilege of being powerful is not money.

It is reduced exposure to honest feedback.

That can destroy judgment.

Even small authority can produce that.

Coach says something stupid.

Kids may laugh if relationship is safe.

If not, silence.

Coach interprets silence as seriousness.

Look how focused they are.

No, Coach.

They are waiting for you to finish.

I need people who can tell me that.

The same goes for family.

When older adults confuse deference with agreement, they can live inside false consensus.

People don't argue because arguing is exhausting.

Then the elder thinks:

Everyone knows I'm right.

Maybe everyone simply knows you'll keep talking.

Possible.

Painful.

Useful.

I want to become a person whose relationships do not require people to manage my ego.

That's a high standard.

Imagine someone thinking:

Don't tell Jose that. He'll get defensive.

I don't want that.

Maybe sometimes they already have.

I cannot edit the past.

I can try to reduce the future need.

That requires proving through repetition that disagreement is safe.

Not announcing it once.

"Tell me anything."

Okay.

Then they tell me.

My face changes.

I explain for fifteen minutes.

Invitation revoked.

Behavior writes constitution, not slogans.

This is perhaps the most important leadership lesson in the chapter:

People learn what is permitted by what survives contact with authority.

If disagreement survives, more truth becomes available.

If bad news survives, people bring bad news earlier.

If admitting mistakes survives, mistakes become visible.

If vulnerability gets punished, everyone starts performing competence.

Then the leader eventually makes decisions inside fiction.

Tyranny creates bad information.

That alone should make control freaks reconsider.

You cannot command honesty reliably.

You create conditions where honesty is less costly.

That is different.

Trust again.

There is one form of internal tyranny I have not addressed enough:

shame.

Shame is an authoritarian.

It does not say:

You behaved badly.

It says:

You are bad.

No appeal.

No context.

No revision.

Permanent verdict.

That is not accountability.

It is totalitarian identity.

I know the difference intellectually.

Living it is harder.

When I recognize a flaw, part of me can turn the confession into indictment.

See?

You talk too much.

You control.

You need recognition.

You're a hypocrite.

No.

Behavior.

Pattern.

Responsibility.

Change.

Not permanent essence.

If I use self-confrontation to strip myself of dignity, I will eventually avoid self-confrontation.

Who voluntarily attends a court where every hearing ends in execution?

Mercy keeps the audit open.

That does not mean soft standards.

It means possibility of revision.

A constitutional democracy allows amendment.

Maybe character requires the same.

This is why I believe disallowing tyranny begins internally.

Not ends internally.

Political action still matters.

Institutions still matter.

Voting matters.

Law matters.

Resistance matters.

But if I condemn authoritarianism publicly while demanding obedience privately, I have missed part of the lesson.

If I demand accountability from leaders while refusing it myself, same.

If I rage against dehumanization while reducing people I dislike to caricatures, same.

The scale differs.

The contradiction remains.

I cannot save democracy by becoming less controlling at baseball practice.

Let's not become ridiculous.

But I can refuse to rehearse the psychology I claim to oppose.

That is within my radius.

Maybe democracy is partly a habit before it is a system.

Listening.

Tolerating dissent.

Accepting losing.

Respecting procedures even when outcomes disappoint.

Recognizing legitimacy outside your tribe.

Revising.

Sharing power.

Those habits can be practiced everywhere.

So can the opposite habits.

I worry when people say:

If only the right people had total power.

That sentence misunderstands power.

Everyone imagines themselves among the right people.

The constitutional question is:

What happens when the people you distrust hold the authority you're creating?

Excellent test.

Chapter Ten used a similar one with fairness.

Would I support the rule if my opponent controlled it?

If not, maybe I don't support the rule.

Maybe I support my side.

Same test personally.

Would I tolerate my player using the same tone with me that I use with him?

Context matters because roles differ.

Still informative.

Would I want someone giving me advice with the persistence I use with others?

Would I accept a boss punishing me emotionally the way I sometimes want to respond to a player's mistake?

Symmetry reveals.

I know there are asymmetries that matter.

Coach and player are not equals in responsibility.

Parent and child.

Employer and employee.

Government and citizen.

Power differences are real.

Precisely why restraint matters more from the powerful side.

The person with greater capacity to impose consequences carries greater obligation to examine motive.

That seems obvious.

History suggests it isn't.

I want to apply that locally.

The louder voice should sometimes speak softer.

The person controlling playing time should be cautious with humiliation.

The person controlling money should be cautious with financial pressure.

The parent whose approval matters should be cautious with conditional affection.

Power magnifies ordinary behavior.

A joke from a teammate is one thing.

The same joke from the coach can become a verdict.

Remember the microphone.

I have not always remembered.

That bothers me.

Good.

Not shame.

Information.

There are players I may have spoken to too sharply.

People I may have over-advised.

Moments where my intensity filled more of the room than I realized.

I cannot reconstruct all of them.

Memory is selective.

But if this chapter changes anything, I want it to be this:

Before using authority, feel the weight difference.

My words may weigh more in their world than theirs weigh in mine.

That should slow me.

A twelve-year-old may remember one sentence a coach forgets before dinner.

That's power.

Not political power.

Still real.

Treat it carefully.

I think of the phrase **disarming the tyrant.**

I don't want to kill the decisive part of myself.

I need him.

There are emergencies.

Standards.

Moments requiring authority.

I want to disarm his automatic weapons.

Certainty without evidence.

Humiliation.

Dehumanization.

Control of people beyond legitimate responsibility.

Punishment driven by ego.

Silencing dissent because it irritates me.

Those weapons should not be available casually.

Give authority slower tools.

Questions.

Proportion.

Boundaries.

Explanation.

Time.

Appeal.

Humor.

Apology.

Those tools may feel less powerful.

Good.

Maybe healthy power should sometimes feel constrained.

The internal tyrant will complain.

This is inefficient.

We're losing control.

People will take advantage.

Maybe sometimes.

Freedom creates risk.

That is the price.

A completely controlled environment can be safe in certain ways.

So can a prison.

Safety cannot be the only metric.

Parents face this painfully.

A child free enough to become herself is free enough to disappoint you.

Players free enough to think can make bad decisions.

Citizens free enough to speak can say stupid things.

Freedom produces errors.

Control produces other errors.

The question is which risks we tolerate and why.

No clean world.

Permanent tension.

I increasingly think mature authority is authority willing to be unnecessary.

That keeps returning.

The coach wants players thinking without him.

The parent wants an adult child capable without him.

The leader wants institutions functioning beyond him.

The teacher wants students who can challenge the teacher.

The tyrant needs permanent dependence.

That may be a useful distinction.

Ask a leader:

What happens when you leave?

If the answer is collapse, maybe leadership failed.

Or circumstances were difficult.

Nuance.

Still, succession reveals motives.

The ego wants to be irreplaceable.

Healthy systems want continuity.

Chapter Nine smiles.

I know I am replaceable in many roles.

That used to threaten me more.

Now I think it protects the people around me.

They should not need Jose Franco for the system to work.

They may want me.

Love me.

Value me.

Different.

Need created by intentional dependence is not love.

It's architecture.

The internal tyrant loves being indispensable.

Don't feed him that.

So here is Confession Number Fifteen.

I can see the authoritarian impulse in people I dislike much more easily than I see it in myself.

I have enjoyed authority.

I have mistaken compliance for agreement.

I have sometimes interpreted resistance as disrespect.

I have used experience as leverage.

I have treated my good intentions as evidence that my methods were good.

I have wanted control when what I really wanted was relief from fear.

I have occasionally made disagreement more expensive than I intended.

And I know that if I believe these tendencies are impossible in me, I become less capable of stopping them.

That is the confession.

Not:

I am a tyrant.

That would be melodramatic and false.

It is:

The psychological ingredients from which tyranny is built are not foreign to me.

That is more frightening.

More useful too.

I want to keep the tyrant small.

Better yet, employed but supervised.

He can handle emergencies.

Set boundaries.

Say no.

Protect people.

Enforce legitimate rules.

Then he goes home.

He does not write the entire constitution.

And when I hear him saying:

They need to understand.

I want curiosity beside him asking:

Why?

When he says:

They should listen.

Another voice asks:

Have you listened?

When he says:

You're right.

Maybe.

When he says:

Make them.

The constitution asks:

By what authority?

For what purpose?

At what cost?

That is the internal system I want.

Not perfect freedom.

Accountable power.

Maybe the first defense against tyranny is not thinking:

I would never become that.

Maybe it is thinking:

What conditions make human beings—including me—more willing to control, silence, punish, dehumanize, and obey?

Fear.

Humiliation.

Certainty.

Tribalism.

Power.

Isolation from criticism.

Moral purity.

Grievance.

Those are not exotic materials.

They are lying around everywhere.

That is why vigilance matters.

I will continue condemning tyranny where it becomes political and institutional.

Some acts deserve unequivocal opposition.

But I do not want condemnation becoming self-flattery.

The easy moral position is:

I am nothing like those people.

The harder position is:

I oppose what they became enough to examine the smaller impulses in myself that point in the same direction.

Again, not equivalence.

Prevention.

A bridge inspector does not wait for collapse before respecting cracks.

Maybe that's the work.

Disarm the tyrant before he has jurisdiction.

Before fear becomes control.

Before disagreement becomes disrespect.

Before authority becomes identity.

Before a rule becomes sacred simply because I wrote it.

Before love becomes ownership.

Before discipline becomes punishment.

Before being right becomes permission.

Earlier.

Latency again.

Catch the impulse earlier.

One day perhaps a player will challenge something I say.

And before my ego responds, I'll think:

Good.

The system works.

One day my daughter may tell me:

Dad, I know you mean well, but I need to make this decision myself.

And instead of hearing rejection, maybe I will hear evidence of development.

One day someone may tell me this book is wrong about something.

Maybe I'll investigate before explaining.

That would be progress.

Not ideological progress.

Human progress.

Mine.

Small radius.

Enough.

The world has enough people certain that everyone else is the problem.

I have been one of them at times.

I don't want to stop identifying real problems.

I want to remove the exemption I quietly grant myself.

Because tyranny at its largest scale may require armies, laws, institutions, and fear.

But the first little kingdom is much closer.

The territory between my ears.

And if I cannot govern that territory without silencing every dissenting voice, then I should probably be very careful telling anybody else how freedom is supposed to work.

SIXTEEN: DISCIPLINE WITHOUT EMPATHY IS JUST INSTITUTIONALIZED CRUELTY

Confession #16: Standards Become Dangerous When I Forget the Human Being Carrying Them

I believe in discipline.

That sentence has survived every confession so far.

I believe in showing up.

I believe in preparation.

I believe in doing difficult things when nobody is watching.

I believe in keeping promises after motivation disappears.

I believe in accountability.

I believe in consequences.

I believe children should learn that effort matters.

I believe adults should accept responsibility.

I believe teams need standards.

I believe families need boundaries.

I believe societies cannot function if every personal preference becomes an exemption.

I believe all of that.

And I also believe this:

Discipline without empathy eventually becomes cruelty with a schedule.

That is the confession.

Not because discipline is cruel.

Because discipline can become so convinced of its own righteousness that it stops noticing who is being crushed underneath it.

Cruelty is easy to condemn when it looks cruel.

A man screaming in somebody's face.

A parent humiliating a child.

A coach physically or emotionally abusing a player.

A boss deliberately degrading an employee.

Easy.

The more difficult form wears a uniform.

Procedure.

Policy.

Tradition.

Standards.

"That's the rule."

"I treat everyone the same."

"No exceptions."

"Life isn't fair."

"He's got to learn."

"We're preparing them for the real world."

Those sentences can be reasonable.

They can also become hiding places.

Sometimes the cruelest systems are not operated by people who enjoy cruelty.

They're operated by people who believe consistency itself is virtue.

I understand the appeal.

Consistency feels fair.

Same rule.

Everyone.

No favoritism.

Simple.

If you're late, consequence.

If you miss practice, consequence.

If you don't prepare, consequence.

There is dignity in predictability.

People should know where the lines are.

I want that as a coach.

But life keeps introducing context.

A kid is late because he didn't care.

Another is late because his mother got stuck at work.

Same behavior.

Different reality.

What does fairness require?

Identical punishment?

Maybe.

Sometimes.

But if fairness means refusing to see context, then equality becomes blindness.

This is where discipline and justice collide.

Equal treatment is not always equitable treatment.

There.

A sentence capable of starting an argument before breakfast.

But the underlying problem is real.

If two players miss practice, do they deserve the same response?

What if one communicated in advance?

What if another simply didn't show?

What if one's family has transportation problems?

What if the same kid has done it six times?

Pattern matters.

Intent matters.

Impact matters.

Team responsibility matters.

Context matters.

Nothing simple survives.

I can already hear the objection:

Then rules mean nothing.

No.

That is binary thinking.

The alternatives are not rigid enforcement or chaos.

There is a middle structure.

Standard.

Context.

Judgment.

Consequence.

Review.

Harder.

Much harder.

Because now the person in authority cannot hide behind the rule.

He has to think.

And thinking creates responsibility.

"I was just enforcing policy."

Human history contains some terrifying versions of that sentence.

Again, I am not equating youth baseball discipline with historical atrocities.

Scale matters.

But the psychological mechanism is worth examining.

Rules can distribute responsibility so widely that nobody feels individually responsible for the outcome.

I didn't decide.

The policy did.

Interesting.

Who wrote the policy?

Who enforced it?

Who had discretion?

Who looked at the human being and decided the procedure mattered more than the circumstances?

Sometimes the answer should still be:

The rule applies.

But I want somebody consciously making that decision.

Not sleepwalking behind procedure.

I have probably hidden behind structure.

Coaches do.

"It's my rule."

Good.

Why?

If I cannot answer beyond "because I said so," maybe the rule deserves inspection.

Some rules are simple.

No throwing bats.

Why?

Safety.

No argument.

Some are developmental.

Miss practice, don't start.

Why?

Team reliability.

Maybe appropriate.

But if the consequence no longer serves the developmental purpose, what am I protecting?

The kid?

The team?

Or my authority?

A consequence should teach something.

At least that's what I tell myself.

But consequences can quietly become emotional repayment.

You frustrated me.

Now you will feel discomfort.

That's punishment as nervous-system transfer.

Adult upset.

Child pays.

I do not like that.

I know I have moved toward it at times.

Not proudly.

Enough to recognize it.

There is a dangerous satisfaction when someone "gets what they deserve."

We rarely admit that.

The kid didn't prepare.

He fails.

Part of us says:

Good.

Maybe not because we enjoy his pain.

Because the outcome confirms the moral order.

See?

Preparation matters.

I told you.

Chapter Fourteen again.

Being proven right can contaminate empathy.

What if the lesson lands without my enjoying the bruise?

That seems better.

You didn't prepare.

The consequence happened.

I wish it hadn't.

Let's learn.

No gloating.

No "I told you so."

No need to squeeze every drop of shame from the moment.

Reality already taught something.

The adult does not need to pile on.

I think coaches underestimate how often reality is already disciplining the kid.

He struck out.

Everybody saw.

He knows.

Then he reaches the dugout and the coach delivers an additional speech.

Maybe needed.

Often not.

The game already communicated.

Sometimes silence is the more disciplined coaching choice.

Again, I am learning this embarrassingly late.

I have watched adults punish children for looking disappointed.

That bothers me.

Kid makes an error.

He's upset.

Coach says:

"Get your head up!"

Fair.

Body language affects teammates.

But what exactly are we asking?

Regulation?

Or emotional disappearance?

There is a difference.

A child can feel shame, frustration, anger, embarrassment, and still learn to function.

That seems like the skill.

Not:

Stop feeling that.

But:

Feel it without abandoning the next play.

That is emotional discipline.

I prefer that.

Because suppression can imitate toughness.

The player looks composed.

Inside, panic.

Then someday the system leaks.

Maybe anger.

Maybe avoidance.

Maybe quitting.

We tell kids to be mentally tough.

What does that mean?

Never show emotion?

Recover quickly?

Take responsibility?

Perform under pressure?

Remain open to correction?

Ask for help?

Those are different skills.

If I fail to define toughness, I may simply reward whichever emotional style makes adults most comfortable.

Usually quiet compliance.

That is not necessarily toughness.

Sometimes it's fear.

I think about boys specifically.

We often ask them to tolerate discomfort.

Good.

Life requires that.

But sometimes we teach the wrong lesson:

Your discomfort is irrelevant.

That can be destructive.

The better lesson may be:

Your discomfort is real and does not automatically control your behavior.

That is powerful.

Empathy acknowledges the feeling.

Discipline governs the response.

Neither cancels the other.

That may be the entire chapter.

Empathy says: I see what this costs you.

Discipline says: The responsibility still exists.

Both.

Again.

Imagine a player is terrified to pitch.

Empathy alone might say:

Don't worry. You don't have to.

Maybe appropriate.

Discipline alone:

Get on the mound and stop being scared.

Maybe harmful.

Integrated:

I know you're scared.

Let's understand why.

You're still capable of doing this.

We'll prepare.

You'll take the ball.

I am here.

Different.

The standard remains.

The child remains visible.

That's what I want.

Not softness.

Humanity.

I think people confuse empathy with agreement.

I can understand why you did something and still say no.

I can understand why a player skipped practice and still apply a consequence.

I can understand someone's financial difficulty and still require payment under an agreement.

I can empathize with the cause and maintain the boundary.

Empathy does not erase structure.

It changes the manner in which structure is carried.

That matters.

A judge can sentence and still see a person.

A coach can bench and still preserve dignity.

A parent can say no without humiliation.

A boss can fire someone without making the person feel subhuman.

The consequence may hurt.

Empathy does not promise painless accountability.

It promises we won't add unnecessary cruelty.

That's a meaningful distinction.

I have used the phrase "the real world."

Kids need to learn what the real world is like.

I understand the idea.

Deadlines.

Competition.

Consequences.

No one guarantees fairness.

All true.

But adults sometimes use "the real world" as justification for reproducing the worst parts of the world unnecessarily.

Life will be cruel, so I'll prepare you by being cruel.

Interesting logic.

Why not prepare them by teaching resilience inside an environment that also models dignity?

The real world contains both.

Cruelty and kindness.

Competition and cooperation.

Standards and mercy.

If I teach only hardness, I am not preparing them for reality.

I am narrowing it.

There is a masculinity version again.

The world won't care about your feelings.

Maybe.

Some people won't.

Others will.

Your family should.

Your teammates may.

You should care about your own enough to understand them.

The lesson should not be:

Feelings don't matter.

It should be:

Feelings matter, but they are not always commands.

That is more difficult.

More useful.

I think discipline without empathy often begins with fear of permissiveness.

If I understand too much, maybe standards disappear.

If I forgive, they will take advantage.

If I make an exception, everybody will want one.

Sometimes legitimate concerns.

Humans respond to incentives.

Teams need predictability.

But fear of losing control can turn every exception into a threat.

Chapter Fourteen.

Again.

There are times an exception is unfair to everyone else.

That matters.

A coach constantly excusing one player's lateness damages trust.

Empathy toward one person can become disregard toward the group.

So empathy also requires peripheral vision.

What does this decision communicate to everyone else?

No easy answer.

Maybe compassion requires boundaries precisely because other people matter too.

If I tolerate repeated irresponsibility from one player, teammates pay.

If I enable one family member financially forever, other obligations suffer.

If a workplace retains destructive behavior because the employee has difficult circumstances, other employees absorb the harm.

Empathy cannot become tunnel vision.

That is another way it can fail.

I want **informed standards.**

Not rigid standards.

Not disappearing standards.

Standards informed by context and impact.

That sounds less motivational.

More adult.

The phrase institutionalized cruelty matters because systems can preserve harshness beyond the intentions of any one person.

A policy begins because of one problem.

Then nobody revisits it.

People suffer.

"We've always done it."

Chapter Fifteen.

Tradition becomes moral camouflage.

This happens in schools.

Sports.

Businesses.

Governments.

Families.

Maybe even inside one person's habits.

I have internal institutions too.

Rules.

Beliefs.

Work harder.

Don't complain.

Push through.

Be responsible.

Good institutions.

Until conditions change.

What if my body needs rest?

What if grief needs time?

What if the disciplined decision is stopping?

The internal bureaucrat says:

Request denied.

Policy is policy.

That's self-cruelty.

I have probably been harder on myself than necessary at times.

Not because I hate myself.

Because I idealize discipline.

That matters.

The person can wound himself with virtues.

Work ethic becomes exhaustion.

Frugality becomes fear.

Exercise becomes compulsion.

Responsibility becomes inability to receive help.

Standards become permanent dissatisfaction.

These aren't arguments against virtues.

They are arguments against worshiping them.

Every virtue needs a neighboring virtue keeping watch.

Discipline needs empathy.

Courage needs judgment.

Confidence needs humility.

Generosity needs boundaries.

Ambition needs gratitude.

Loyalty needs conscience.

Patience needs action.

Skepticism needs openness.

Chapter Six already built this structure.

I keep discovering how practical it is.

Discipline left alone asks:

Did you do what you were supposed to do?

Empathy asks:

What happened?

Those questions need each other.

If only the first:

Mechanical.

If only the second:

Potentially endless excuse.

Together:

What happened?

Okay.

What remains your responsibility?

That is the conversation I want.

I think shame enters when empathy disappears.

Shame says:

Because you failed the standard, something is wrong with you.

Accountability says:

You failed the standard.

Specific.

Repairable.

That distinction could change youth sports.

Maybe families too.

Maybe everything.

I have embarrassed kids.

I do not say that proudly.

Not intentionally as a coaching strategy.

But intention again.

There have been moments where my intensity, tone, or public correction may have made a player feel smaller.

I cannot inventory every moment accurately.

Memory will protect me.

But statistically?

After decades coaching?

Of course I have.

That hurts.

It should.

The question is not whether I meant to.

The question is what I do with the recognition.

I cannot travel backward.

I can change the environment going forward.

Correct behavior without turning the player into the correction.

One instruction.

Specific.

Then back to baseball.

Not:

"How many times have I told you?"

That sentence carries history like a weapon.

I have used it.

How many times?

What exactly does the question accomplish?

The kid does not know the number.

I do not know the number.

The actual message is:

You are exhausting me.

Maybe true.

Still, is that useful for him?

Usually no.

Better:

"You're late getting around the ball again. Earlier first step."

Done.

Data.

Not indictment.

Adults love historical evidence in arguments.

Always.

Never.

Every time.

Same mechanism.

We convert a behavior into identity through accumulated prosecution.

Discipline becomes character judgment.

No wonder people defend themselves.

I want cleaner consequences.

You did X.

The agreement says Y.

Here is the consequence.

No humiliation.

No sermon unless the sermon is needed.

No making the person beg for emotional restoration.

That feels more disciplined than anger.

Maybe true discipline is emotionally boring.

I like that.

Predictable.

Calm.

Specific.

Then move forward.

If I need to remain angry so the person understands the seriousness, maybe my system is weak.

The consequence should communicate seriousness.

My nervous system should not have to perform enforcement.

That is a useful standard for me.

I think of pitching.

I have a two-walk rule.

Two walks in an inning and I may remove the pitcher.

Why?

Because throwing strikes is central to how I believe youth baseball should be played.

Pitch to contact.

Let defense work.

Clear standard.

But the moment of removal matters.

Is the pitcher punished?

Or changed?

I want changed.

Different emotional message.

You're not a bad kid.

You're not a coward.

You're not disappointing me as a person.

You're not throwing enough strikes today.

We're making a change.

Specific.

The pitcher might still feel terrible.

I cannot eliminate that.

Playing time matters.

Competition matters.

But I don't need to convert the baseball decision into shame.

That is where empathy lives.

Not changing reality.

Refusing unnecessary injury.

I think institutions fail this constantly.

They design for the average case.

Then a person arrives with circumstances outside the design.

The bureaucratic answer:

No.

Maybe necessary.

Resources finite.

Rules matter.

But even when the answer remains no, the human experience can differ enormously based on how the no is delivered.

Seen versus dismissed.

Explained versus processed.

Dignity matters even when outcome cannot change.

That may sound soft to people obsessed with efficiency.

Fine.

Efficiency is not the only value.

Humans are not packages moving through a warehouse.

Systems exist because people exist.

When the system forgets that, it becomes absurd.

Businesses struggle here.

You need policies.

You cannot renegotiate everything individually.

Yet employees are people.

Illness happens.

Children get sick.

Parents die.

Transportation fails.

People make mistakes.

If every human circumstance becomes a loophole, operations collapse.

If none matter, the organization becomes inhuman.

Leadership is living in that tension.

No app solves it completely.

The same with landlords and tenants.

Contracts matter.

Payments matter.

Expenses are real.

So are human emergencies.

Empathy does not make mortgage bills disappear.

Structure does not erase suffering.

Both realities can exist.

Maybe humane systems are systems capable of seeing both without pretending one dissolves the other.

I have to watch my own self-interest there.

Empathy is easier when I don't bear the cost.

Generosity with someone else's resources is cheap.

That is important.

If a person says:

You should make an exception,

maybe the exception costs me.

That matters.

Conversely, if I say:

Rules are rules,

maybe somebody else bears a cost I barely feel.

That matters too.

Justice again.

Who pays?

No clean answer.

But pretending there is one usually favors the person with power.

So at minimum:

Name the tradeoff.

That feels more honest.

I think youth sports contains institutionalized cruelty in subtle ways.

Not every hard practice.

Not competition itself.

Competition can be healthy.

I mean adults normalizing behavior they would reject in almost any other setting because:

Sports.

A coach humiliates.

"He's old-school."

A child plays hurt.

"Tough."

A parent screams.

"Competitive."

A kid is terrified of failure.

"He needs mental toughness."

Maybe sometimes.

But sports do not suspend dignity.

The scoreboard is not constitutional authority.

I love baseball too much to use baseball as an excuse for hurting children.

That sentence matters to me.

If the game becomes the reason I forget the child, I have reversed the priorities.

Baseball is the vehicle.

Human development is larger.

That doesn't mean every child must leave every game happy.

No.

Losing hurts.

Sitting hurts.

Striking out hurts.

Being told you're not ready hurts.

That pain can be developmental.

I don't want adults anesthetizing every disappointment.

But disappointment is not humiliation.

Failure is not degradation.

Consequences are not cruelty.

The distinctions matter.

Maybe good coaching creates **safe struggle.**

I like that phrase.

Not safe from failure.

Safe enough to fail.

Different.

The kid can make an aggressive mistake without believing the adult relationship is now threatened.

He can be corrected without feeling discarded.

He can compete hard without thinking baseball determines his worth.

He can experience consequences without losing dignity.

That's an environment where discipline and empathy cooperate.

I want that.

Not because I want soft players.

Because I want resilient ones.

Resilience requires recovery.

Recovery is easier when failure does not become identity.

The adult who shames a kid may get short-term compliance.

That's the trap.

Cruel methods sometimes work.

Fear works.

Humiliation works.

Punishment works.

At least temporarily.

That is why they persist.

If harmful methods never produced results, nobody would defend them.

The real question is:

At what cost?

A coach screams.

Player performs.

Coach says:

See?

It worked.

Maybe.

What else happened?

Did the kid become more dependent on external pressure?

Did anxiety increase?

Did he learn the skill or learn to avoid the coach's anger?

What happens when the coach is gone?

Outcome alone cannot answer.

Chapter Ten.

Institutions often measure what is easy.

Wins.

Grades.

Output.

Attendance.

Revenue.

Discipline infractions.

Then unmeasured costs disappear.

Anxiety.

Distrust.

Fear.

Loss of curiosity.

Burnout.

Humiliation.

These costs are hard to quantify.

That does not mean imaginary.

A metric can become a blindfold if it is mistaken for the whole system.

Baseball statistics teach this.

A player's average says something.

Not everything.

A win says something.

Not everything.

Team culture may be invisible in the box score.

Until it isn't.

A team collapses under pressure.

Suddenly invisible variables become visible.

Trust.

Confidence.

Fear.

Communication.

Those things were always there.

Measurement merely lagged.

Empathy is partly measuring what does not fit neatly into numbers.

What is this kid experiencing?

Not:

Therefore excuse him.

Just:

Include the data.

Human data.

I have learned that a player can obey and still be lost.

He can nod and not understand.

Chapter One.

He can perform and be afraid.

He can smile and hate baseball.

He can say:

"I'm fine, Coach."

Maybe.

Adults should be cautious about treating outward compliance as health.

The same applies to families.

A child who never challenges may be wonderfully respectful.

Or afraid.

A spouse who never disagrees may be content.

Or exhausted.

An employee who never complains may be engaged.

Or looking for another job.

No universal interpretation.

But empathy keeps curiosity alive.

I think discipline without empathy becomes especially cruel when imposed by people who have forgotten what weakness felt like.

Successful adults rewrite their histories.

"I never made excuses."

Really?

At twelve?

At seventeen?

At twenty-five?

No fear?

No stupidity?

No luck?

Memory again.

We remember overcoming.

Forget the people who helped.

Then demand that others climb without scaffolding.

I do not want to romanticize hardship just because I survived some.

Survival does not validate every condition.

"If it didn't kill me, it made me stronger."

Maybe.

Sometimes what didn't kill you just hurt you.

Maybe strength grew despite it.

Important distinction.

I can be grateful for capacities developed through difficult experiences while still asking whether the unnecessary suffering should be reproduced.

That is maturity.

Not betrayal of the past.

Older generations sometimes say:

We turned out fine.

Did we?

Maybe partly.

We also carry patterns.

Men unable to speak emotionally.

Parents repeating humiliation.

People who work until their bodies revolt.

Substance use.

Silence.

Control.

Resentment.

Every generation has strengths and scars.

Survival does not certify the method.

The question should be:

What strength was developed?

Can we develop the strength with less collateral damage?

That is evolution.

In baseball:

Do players need pressure?

Yes.

Can we create pressure without humiliation?

Yes.

Do they need accountability?

Yes.

Can we hold them accountable without attacking identity?

Yes.

Do they need to learn disappointment?

Yes.

Can adults refuse to manufacture extra disappointment for character-building theater?

Yes.

Then why wouldn't we?

Tradition?

Ego?

Laziness?

Maybe because cruelty is sometimes simpler than teaching.

It is easier to yell:

"Focus!"

than create a practice requiring focus.

Easier:

"Be mentally tough!"

than teach emotional regulation.

Easier:

"Throw strikes!"

than develop mechanics, confidence, intent, and practice design.

Adults can demand capacities they haven't taught.

Then blame kids for not having them.

I have done versions of that.

That is a coaching blind spot.

If a kid lacks a skill, ask whether we trained it.

We expect self-awareness.

Did we teach reflection?

We expect confidence.

Did we create opportunities for mastery?

We expect communication.

Did we make speaking safe?

We expect resilience.

Did we normalize recoverable failure?

We expect accountability.

Do adults model apologies?

Hard questions.

Good ones.

This is where empathy becomes operational.

Not just feeling bad.

Designing better environments.

If I know a kid is anxious, maybe practice can simulate pressure progressively.

If I know communication is difficult, ask simpler questions.

If I know a child learns differently, vary instruction.

Empathy informs method.

It does not eliminate objective.

That is important.

Compassion should make teaching more precise.

Not vague.

I like that.

There is also a danger of **performative empathy.**

We use compassionate language but never alter structure.

"I hear you."

Then same harmful practice.

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Chapter Twelve.

Empathy is not vocabulary.

It should sometimes change behavior.

Not always.

Sometimes after hearing someone I still conclude the rule stands.

But if empathy never changes anything, maybe I am merely performing benevolence.

The inverse:

If empathy always changes the rule, maybe I have no standards.

Again.

Tension.

I increasingly think leadership is deciding which discomfort belongs to growth and which belongs to unnecessary harm.

Impossible to know perfectly.

But the distinction should be attempted.

A kid's frustration from being benched?

Potentially developmental.

Humiliation from the coach mocking him?

Unnecessary.

An employee's discomfort from critical feedback?

Necessary sometimes.

Public degradation?

Usually not.

A daughter's discomfort because I disagree with her?

Normal.

Manipulating affection until she complies?

Not okay.

The line isn't always blurry.

Sometimes we make it blurry because clarity would inconvenience us.

That sentence matters.

Nuance should not be used to obscure obvious cruelty.

There are moments where we know.

Don't humiliate children.

Don't deliberately exploit dependency.

Don't use someone's vulnerability as punishment.

Don't call degradation character-building.

Standards do not need those methods.

I think empathy is sometimes strongest when it says:

No.

This behavior cannot continue.

People romanticize empathy as endless accommodation.

No.

If someone is harming others, empathy toward everyone may require boundary.

If a player is repeatedly disruptive, teammates deserve a functional environment.

If a family member's behavior becomes abusive, love may require distance.

If someone refuses responsibility, compassion does not mean volunteering as permanent collateral damage.

Empathy includes myself too.

That's important.

I can become so focused on understanding others that I abandon boundaries.

That is not virtue.

Maybe fear of being harsh.

Maybe need to be liked.

Empathy without self-respect becomes enabling.

Then resentment follows.

Eventually I become cruel anyway.

Better to establish the boundary early.

Cleanly.

Discipline can protect empathy.

Another paradox.

A clear boundary prevents resentment from accumulating.

A predictable consequence reduces emotional punishment.

A routine can reduce conflict.

Structure can be compassionate.

We should not frame discipline and empathy as enemies.

They need each other.

Maybe the phrase "discipline without empathy is institutionalized cruelty" requires its mirror:

Empathy without discipline can become institutionalized helplessness.

Both are dangerous.

I still prefer the original confession because my own tendency leans toward discipline.

The book is an audit of me, not universal symmetry.

That distinction matters.

Someone else may need Chapter Sixteen reversed.

I have intensity.

I know it.

So my corrective is not becoming passive.

It is adding empathy before intensity becomes pressure.

Someone else may be so accommodating that their corrective is stronger boundaries.

Different people need different medicine.

Again, no commandment.

Confession.

I like the word discipline in its older sense too:

learning.

Disciple.

Practice.

Instruction.

Modern usage often collapses discipline into punishment.

Maybe that is part of the problem.

Real discipline is teaching a person to govern themselves.

Punishment can sometimes support that.

But punishment is not the objective.

Self-governance is.

Chapter Fourteen.

If a consequence creates only obedience while authority is present, did we teach discipline?

Maybe not.

We taught surveillance response.

The player hustles because Coach is looking.

What happens when Coach turns away?

Quiet unseen moments.

There's the actual test.

Fear can produce compliant behavior.

Character produces behavior without surveillance.

If I want character, I need more than punishment.

Explanation.

Ownership.

Repetition.

Trust.

Empathy.

Consequences too.

Integrated.

This is why public humiliation is particularly poor teaching.

The attention shifts.

Instead of:

What did I do?

The kid thinks:

Everyone is watching me.

How do I escape this?

Shame floods learning.

Maybe he complies.

But the lesson becomes:

Avoid exposure.

Not:

Understand behavior.

I remember being young enough to know that humiliation sticks.

Adults forget their words faster than children do.

A coach can move on in thirty seconds.

The kid can replay the sentence for years.

Again, power asymmetry.

Chapter Fifteen.

Words weigh differently downward.

That should discipline me.

Maybe empathy is partly imagination.

Can I remember what it felt like to be twelve?

Not romantically.

Honestly.

Confused.

Proud.

Insecure.

Wanting adults' approval and resenting needing it.

Feeling embarrassment intensely.

Wanting to look tough.

Not always knowing why I did what I did.

If I can remember that, perhaps my expectations become more developmentally accurate.

Not lower.

Accurate.

A twelve-year-old is not a failed thirty-year-old.

He is twelve.

Seems obvious.

Adults forget.

We punish immature behavior as though immaturity were a moral violation.

Some behaviors need correction.

But adolescence is not misconduct.

It's development.

The same with twenty-two-year-olds.

Thirty-year-olds.

Even sixty-year-olds.

Development never ends.

Maybe this book proves it.

I am still trying to regulate impulses I intellectually understood decades ago.

Why would I expect a child to integrate one instruction immediately?

Patience should grow from self-knowledge.

I have told players the same thing repeatedly and become frustrated.

Then I remember:

How many chapters have I spent telling myself not to over-explain?

Exactly.

Maybe the kid gets another repetition.

That does not mean infinite patience.

Teams have timelines.

Games happen.

Some players are not ready.

Decisions still required.

But frustration should be information for me, not punishment for them.

I like that.

I also need empathy toward coaches.

Including myself.

It is easy to criticize harsh coaching from a distance.

Coaches carry pressure.

Parents.

Wins.

Administration.

Personal ego.

Fatigue.

Sometimes financial insecurity.

Expectations.

Understanding that does not excuse cruelty.

It reminds me that better systems should support adults too.

Dysregulated adults create dysregulated environments.

If we want better coaching, train coaches in more than mechanics.

Teach communication.

Development.

Power.

Emotion.

Maybe self-confrontation.

The same is true for parents.

Most are improvising with enormous stakes.

They carry how they were parented.

Fear.

Love.

Exhaustion.

Money.

Marriage.

Work.

Then somebody tells them:

Do better.

Maybe.

But systems of support matter.

Again, personal responsibility inside context.

Always both.

Institutional cruelty often survives because people inside the institution are exhausted.

No time.

No staff.

No resources.

So procedure replaces judgment.

That is understandable.

Still harmful.

This is why structural criticism matters alongside moral criticism.

Sometimes the individual actor is not sadistic.

The design produces harshness.

Fixing behavior alone won't fix design.

I don't want this book becoming purely individualistic.

Self-confrontation matters.

So do systems.

A humane person inside a cruel structure can reduce harm.

May not be enough.

A well-designed structure operated by cruel people can still fail.

We need both.

Character and architecture.

Maybe that is the political lesson buried in this personal chapter.

Institutions should not require saintly people to remain humane.

Good design assumes ordinary human limitations.

At the same time, no design permanently substitutes for conscience.

Laws need judgment.

Policies need review.

Rules need human eyes.

My coaching philosophy needs the same.

I can write rules.

Two walks.

Throw strikes.

Defense.

Trust.

But no philosophy should relieve me from seeing the kid.

The player is not a case study in my system.

He is a person.

The philosophy serves him and the team.

He does not exist to prove the philosophy.

That sentence matters.

Same for this book.

The reader does not exist to validate Jose Franco's framework.

Take what helps.

Discard what doesn't.

Question it.

If a principle becomes cruel in application, revisit it.

No doctrine should outrank humanity automatically.

There is a form of discipline I admire more as I age.

Restraint.

Not doing.

Not speaking.

Not correcting immediately.

Not punishing while angry.

Not sending the text.

Not making the rule in frustration.

Waiting until nervous system and principle are in the same room.

That is discipline too.

Maybe higher discipline.

Young me associated discipline with action.

Older me sees discipline in pause.

Both.

Sometimes do the pushups.

Sometimes go to sleep.

Sometimes confront.

Sometimes wait.

Sometimes hold the player accountable immediately.

Sometimes let him breathe.

Judgment again.

No automation.

I want to become less impressed by harshness.

Harshness looks strong.

Especially from a distance.

Strict coach.

Demanding leader.

No-nonsense parent.

Maybe excellent.

Maybe insecure.

The tone tells me little.

I want outcomes and methods.

Do people become more capable?

More responsible?

More autonomous?

Or more afraid?

That tells me more.

A harsh system can produce high performance.

We need to admit that.

Authoritarian environments can create discipline.

Fear can create execution.

This makes the ethical question harder.

If cruelty never worked, we wouldn't need the chapter.

But human beings are not machines where output is the only metric.

The method matters because the person matters beyond performance.

That is my line.

A kid may throw harder because he fears me.

I don't want that advantage.

A child may obey because affection feels conditional.

I don't want that obedience.

An employee may work eighty hours because the workplace terrorizes people.

Revenue may rise.

Still a cost.

Not everything valuable appears on the scoreboard.

This is where will to power must be redefined again.

If my "strength" depends on making someone weaker, that is cheap power.

If my discipline requires somebody else's fear, cheap power.

The harder power is developing standards people eventually internalize without needing me to terrorize them.

That takes longer.

Less dramatic.

More durable.

Maybe the strongest coach is the one whose team remains disciplined when he speaks softly.

The strongest parent is the one whose adult child can disagree without fearing loss of love.

The strongest leader is the one whose people can deliver bad news.

The strongest person is the one capable of holding a boundary without needing to humiliate.

That is strength I respect more now.

I am not there consistently.

That's why this is a confession.

There are moments I still want the faster method.

Say it sharply.

Get attention.

Immediate response.

Maybe sometimes sharpness is needed.

But I need to know when urgency is real and when I am simply impatient.

Impatience is one of cruelty's smaller gateways.

The other person is taking too long to become what I want.

So pressure increases.

Development has its own timeline.

A coach can influence.

Not dictate.

A parent can guide.

Not dictate.

Even I cannot dictate my own growth completely.

That should humble me.

I have been working on some of these flaws for decades.

Still here.

Why do I expect somebody else to transform by Tuesday?

Maybe empathy is respect for developmental time.

Not passivity.

Patience with movement.

Observe direction.

Adjust.

But stop demanding instantaneous rewiring.

Human beings are not software updates.

This chapter also forces me to confront forgiveness.

Can I hold someone accountable and eventually stop punishing them after the consequence has been served?

Important.

Some institutions never let a person escape a label.

Mistake becomes identity.

Record becomes destiny.

Sometimes ongoing risk justifies ongoing caution.

But sometimes punishment quietly becomes permanent exclusion.

What is the path back?

A humane system should answer.

Teams too.

Kid screws up.

Does Coach remember forever?

Every new decision colored by old mistake?

Then the player is trapped.

Accountability should allow evidence of change.

Otherwise why change?

The system has already decided who you are.

That's tyranny of memory.

I can do that in relationships.

You always...

Remember when...

Historical evidence resurrected.

Sometimes patterns matter.

You cannot ignore repeated behavior.

But if every past failure remains active forever, nobody can improve enough to escape prosecution.

There needs to be a statute of limitations on some emotional evidence.

Maybe not all.

But some.

Forgiveness does not require forgetting.

Chapter Nineteen will eventually live in love.

But here, discipline needs the possibility of reintegration.

You failed.

You repaired.

Now rejoin.

That is different from endless punishment.

I have seen coaches bench a kid and continue acting angry after the benching.

Why?

The consequence happened.

Maybe because anger was the real consequence.

The benching was just paperwork.

That is a warning.

If I cannot emotionally release after applying a fair consequence, perhaps my motive wasn't purely developmental.

The clean consequence ends.

That is worth practicing.

Self-discipline needs the same mercy.

I miss a standard.

Okay.

Correct.

Do not turn one lapse into week-long self-contempt.

That makes repetition more likely, not less.

Shame can produce collapse.

Specific accountability permits return.

This is true for exercise.

Money.

Writing.

Habits.

Everything.

Miss one day.

Resume.

No dramatic identity story.

I have sometimes used perfection as discipline.

All or nothing.

If I cannot do it exactly right, the day is ruined.

Binary thinking.

Chapter Five.

A disciplined person should be able to recover from deviation.

Otherwise the system is fragile.

Resilience matters more than flawless compliance.

Maybe the most humane discipline asks:

How quickly can we return?

Error.

Notice.

Repair.

Return.

Not:

How severely can we punish the error so it never happens again?

Some errors require severe consequence.

Safety.

Abuse.

Serious misconduct.

But most daily human failures benefit from return.

Baseball understands this better than we do.

Error.

Next pitch.

Strikeout.

Next at-bat.

Walk.

Next hitter.

The game does not stop to hold a moral referendum.

It keeps moving.

Maybe that is mercy built into structure.

Another chance comes quickly.

Not guaranteed success.

Another chance.

I like that.

I want my environments to have next pitches.

A kid fails.

There should be a way back.

I fail as a coach.

A way back.

A family member disappoints.

If appropriate, a way back.

A society without pathways back becomes punitive beyond usefulness.

A person without pathways back becomes shame.

There is one exception I need to respect.

Some boundaries end relationships.

Some harms destroy trust so significantly that reintegration is not appropriate.

Empathy does not demand exposure to ongoing danger.

Again, no universal forgiveness policy.

But even then, I can preserve someone's humanity from a distance.

No need to become cruel because contact ended.

That may be enough.

I think this chapter has made me redefine discipline.

Old definition:

Do what must be done regardless of how you feel.

Still useful.

Newer definition:

Develop the capacity to do what responsibility requires while remaining aware of the humanity—yours and others'—inside the requirement.

Longer.

Less catchy.

More complete.

If empathy consistently prevents me from doing what responsibility requires, something is wrong.

If discipline consistently requires me to stop caring how people experience my authority, something is also wrong.

The art is integration.

That word keeps returning.

Integration may be the opposite of ideological purity.

No single virtue gets total control.

So here is Confession Number Sixteen.

I have admired toughness enough to occasionally underestimate tenderness.

I have confused consistency with fairness.

I have sometimes wanted a consequence to relieve my frustration rather than teach.

I have spoken when reality had already taught the lesson.

I have demanded emotional regulation while failing to regulate my own tone.

I have expected children to integrate lessons faster than I integrate mine.

I have occasionally interpreted empathy as softness because I feared losing standards.

And I know that my belief in discipline, if left unexamined, can make unnecessary harshness feel morally respectable.

That is precisely why it needs empathy beside it.

I do not want to become less demanding.

I want to become more precise about what I demand.

Effort.

Honesty.

Preparation.

Responsibility.

Respect.

Team commitment.

Good.

Do I need humiliation?

No.

Do I need fear?

Hopefully not.

Do I need the kid to feel small?

Never as an objective.

If the standard can survive without cruelty, cruelty was never the standard.

It was me.

That is a difficult sentence.

Useful.

Maybe someday a player I coached will remember that I demanded a lot.

I'm okay with that.

I hope he also remembers that failing the standard never meant he lost his dignity in my eyes.

If he remembers only one of those things, I hope it's the second.

Baseball may end for him at fourteen.

Sixteen.

Eighteen.

Twenty-two.

The person continues.

I do not want my coaching philosophy becoming more important than that fact.

There will always be adults who say:

We're getting too soft.

Maybe sometimes we are.

There will always be others saying:

Standards are harmful.

Sometimes maybe.

I do not want either slogan.

I want something harder.

High standards.

Wide humanity.

Clear consequences.

Minimal humiliation.

Strong boundaries.

Open ears.

Demand effort.

Permit emotion.

Teach recovery.

Model apology.

That sounds like a team I would want to coach.

And maybe a person I would want to become.

The real test will not be this chapter.

It will be the next time someone fails a standard I care deeply about.

A player.

A family member.

Me.

My body will tighten.

Frustration may arrive.

The old voice:

He has to learn.

Maybe he does.

Then another question:

What exactly am I trying to teach?

If the answer is responsibility, teach responsibility.

If the answer is fear of me, stop.

If the answer is compliance for my convenience, investigate.

If the answer is protecting the group, set the boundary.

If the answer is that I'm angry, deal with the anger before turning it into curriculum.

That is the work.

Discipline matters because life has consequences.

Empathy matters because people are more than the consequences they create.

I need both truths.

The institution inside me needs both.

The coach needs both.

The father needs both.

The citizen needs both.

And maybe the man trying to get better needs both most of all.

Because there is no virtue in becoming so disciplined that I can no longer feel the person underneath the standard.

That isn't self-mastery.

It is simply cruelty that learned how to follow rules.

SEVENTEEN: I KNOW THE ATROCITIES HUMAN NATURE IS CAPABLE OF, YET I REFUSE THE REFUGE OF CYNICISM

Confession #17: Cynicism Feels Intelligent Because It Protects Me from Disappointment

I understand cynicism.

I really do.

Cynicism is efficient.

It looks at history and says:

Of course.

It looks at politics and says:

Of course.

It looks at greed, war, betrayal, corruption, cruelty, tribalism, exploitation, hypocrisy, and all the ways people hurt one another and says:

What did you expect?

There is comfort in that sentence.

No surprise.

No heartbreak.

No need to trust.

No need to hope.

No need to look foolish for believing people might do better.

Cynicism can feel like intelligence because disappointment rarely catches it unprepared.

That is the temptation.

And I have felt it.

But I do not want to live there.

I have read enough history to know what human beings are capable of.

So have you.

Maybe not every detail.

Enough.

Slavery.

Genocide.

Torture.

Colonization.

War.

Ethnic cleansing.

Political repression.

Religious persecution.

Human experimentation.

Rape used as weapon.

Children starved intentionally.

Entire populations reduced to categories before being reduced to numbers.

And always, afterward, the question:

How could people do this?

That question is important.

But I think an even harder one is:

Why do we keep acting surprised that humans are capable of becoming inhuman toward other humans?

Not because atrocity is normal.

Because the ingredients are.

Fear.

Resentment.

Tribal loyalty.

Obedience.

Dehumanizing language.

Moral certainty.

Economic interest.

Status.

Revenge.

Self-preservation.

Power.

Career incentives.

Silence.

Those are not alien materials.

We met several of them in the previous sixteen chapters.

That is what frightens me.

I used to think studying atrocities meant studying monsters.

Now I think it also means studying ordinary people under extraordinary and sometimes gradually worsening conditions.

That is more disturbing.

The monster allows distance.

The ordinary person removes it.

Again, I want precision.

Understanding the humanity of perpetrators does not flatten morality.

Some acts are evil in every practical sense of the word.

Some people make choices so cruel that accountability should be severe.

But if I reduce every perpetrator to a creature fundamentally unlike me, I learn very little about prevention.

I learn only:

Don't be a monster.

Excellent.

How?

What does the first step toward monstrosity look like when it still feels reasonable?

That question is harder.

Maybe it looks like:

Those people are the problem.

Not yet violence.

Just a category.

Then:

They don't belong.

Then:

They are dangerous.

Then:

They are less deserving.

Then perhaps someday:

What happens to them is unfortunate but necessary.

Language does work before weapons do.

Chapter Three should be listening.

Humans rarely begin with atrocity.

We begin with permission.

Permission not to see.

Permission not to care.

Permission to interpret one group's suffering as less real.

That frightens me more than obvious hatred.

Because obvious hatred is easier to detect.

Indifference can wear a suit.

I have to examine my own selective empathy.

Whose suffering moves me quickly?

Whose do I qualify?

Whose pain do I explain before acknowledging?

When a person belongs to a group I dislike, do I become a better fact-checker before I become a human being?

That is worth asking.

Not because every claim of suffering is accurate.

Evidence still matters.

But if the identity of the victim determines how much curiosity I offer, my empathy has joined a tribe.

This is one reason cynicism is seductive.

If everybody is corrupt, I do not have to distinguish.

If every institution is rigged, investigation becomes unnecessary.

If all politicians are liars, I can stop comparing lies.

If every business is greedy, I can stop evaluating behavior.

If humans are basically terrible, then every act of cruelty confirms the theory.

What an easy worldview.

Unfalsifiable.

Chapter Eleven again.

Cynicism masquerades as sophistication because it rarely risks being wrong.

Say:

People will disappoint you.

Eventually somebody will.

Correct.

Say:

Institutions protect themselves.

Often.

Correct.

Say:

Power corrupts.

Sometimes dramatically.

Correct.

Say:

People act in self-interest.

Yes.

Now what?

Do those truths contain the whole person?

No.

That is where cynicism fails.

Human beings also care for strangers.

Donate kidneys.

Run into burning buildings.

Raise children who are not biologically theirs.

Sit beside dying people.

Teach for little recognition.

Forgive.

Cooperate.

Build hospitals.

Create art.

Tell jokes at funerals.

Share food.

Protect people whose identities differ from theirs.

Risk careers for principles.

Apologize.

Change.

Those facts are real too.

Cynicism has to explain them away as self-interest.

Maybe some are.

Maybe mixed motives.

Chapter Eleven.

But reducing every act of generosity to disguised ego is just another dogma.

I refuse that.

Not because I think humans are fundamentally good.

I don't know what "fundamentally" means in a creature this contradictory.

I think humans are capable.

Capable of cruelty.

Capable of tenderness.

Capable of convincing themselves that either one is necessary.

That is more frightening than goodness.

More hopeful than evil.

The danger is that cynicism can become self-fulfilling.

If I assume everyone is selfish, I behave defensively.

You sense distrust.

You respond defensively.

I say:

See?

People can't be trusted.

Perfect system.

No evidence can escape.

Trust works similarly.

Not blind trust.

But if I offer some openness, perhaps people sometimes respond with openness.

Not always.

Chapter Seven abolished guarantees.

The possibility is enough.

Human relationships require risk.

Cynicism eliminates the risk by eliminating the relationship before betrayal can occur.

That is protection.

Also loss.

I understand why people choose it.

Some people have earned their cynicism through pain.

Betrayal.

Abuse.

Institutions that failed them.

Promises broken repeatedly.

I do not want to preach optimism at somebody whose life taught caution expensively.

That would be cruel.

But caution and cynicism are not identical.

Caution says:

Show me.

Cynicism says:

I already know.

One leaves a door.

The other bricks it shut.

I want the door.

Maybe small.

Maybe guarded.

Still a door.

There is an arrogance in cynicism too.

I see through everything.

Other people are naive.

I know how the world really works.

That posture feels familiar.

It is certainty with darker clothing.

The cynic can become as dogmatic as the idealist.

At least the idealist occasionally builds something.

Chapter Thirteen would like that.

But idealism can be dangerous too.

We need to admit that.

People convinced of human perfectibility have justified terrible systems.

If only society were reorganized correctly.

If only the impure ideas disappeared.

If only the selfish people were reeducated.

Utopia has generated body counts.

So I do not want optimism without skepticism.

That is naïveté.

I want hope with an audit.

Maybe hope is not believing everything will work out.

I dislike that phrase.

Sometimes things do not work out.

Hope might be smaller.

Something better remains possible, and I am willing to participate without guarantees.

That I can live with.

I think baseball taught me this too.

You can be down six runs.

Last inning.

Chances terrible.

Do you quit?

No.

Not because comeback is likely.

Because the game is not over.

There is a difference between probability and possibility.

The mature player understands odds and still competes.

That is not delusion.

That is action under uncertainty.

Maybe hope is similar.

Cynicism says:

Look at the odds.

Hope says:

I did.

Play anyway.

I like that.

I think of history again.

The fact that human beings committed atrocities does not prove improvement impossible.

Some practices once widely accepted are now morally condemned in much of the world.

Slavery is legally abolished almost everywhere even though exploitation persists.

Women gained political rights once denied.

Civil rights expanded.

Medicine improved.

Child labor laws changed childhood in many places.

These are imperfect gains.

Backsliding happens.

New forms of injustice emerge.

But saying nothing improves is historically lazy.

So is saying progress is automatic.

It is neither.

People fought.

Built institutions.

Changed norms.

Then later generations sometimes forgot how fragile the gains were.

Progress is maintenance.

Chapter Eleven's dirty kitchen again.

You do not abolish cruelty once.

Human tendencies remain.

Institutions must be defended.

Norms taught.

History remembered.

Power inspected.

This is less inspiring than "the arc of history bends automatically."

Good.

I don't trust automatic arcs.

People bend things.

Sometimes backward.

I am suspicious of any historical story making moral progress inevitable.

If inevitable, why courage?

Why institutions?

Why vigilance?

Hope becomes complacency.

I prefer contingent hope.

Better happened.

It can happen again.

It can also be lost.

Now responsibility remains.

Cynicism often emerges after idealism collapses.

That pendulum again.

Young person believes institutions are noble.

Discovers corruption.

Now all institutions are corrupt.

Believes leaders are admirable.

Discovers hypocrisy.

Now all leaders are frauds.

Believes relationships are permanent.

Gets betrayed.

Now love is stupid.

One illusion dies.

Another takes its place.

Maybe maturity is refusing both fantasies.

People are not angels.

People are not demons.

Institutions are not saviors.

Not necessarily scams.

Love can fail.

Still matter.

Democracy can be corrupted.

Still worth defending.

Markets can produce exploitation.

Still generate value.

Governments can abuse power.

Still perform necessary functions.

Humanity can be horrifying.

Still worthy of love.

That last one is the hardest.

How do you love a species capable of Auschwitz?

Of slavery?

Of children murdered for identity?

I do not have an elegant answer.

Maybe love is the wrong word at species scale.

But I know I refuse to let the worst humans define the total category.

That would grant cruelty too much authority.

If one person commits an atrocity and I conclude humanity is worthless, the atrocity has colonized my philosophy.

I don't want to give it that territory.

There is an opposite error:

Using stories of kindness to avoid confronting structural cruelty.

"Look, a policeman helped someone."

That does not erase police misconduct.

"A company donated money."

Does not erase exploitation.

"A nation liberated people."

Does not erase other harms.

Hope should not become anesthesia.

I want eyes open.

Both evidence columns.

This may be one of the book's recurring principles:

Refuse emotional conclusions larger than the evidence.

One betrayal does not prove no one can be trusted.

One act of kindness does not prove everyone is good.

One corrupt official does not prove all government corrupt.

One noble official does not prove the institution healthy.

Specific.

Always specific.

Cynicism thrives on universals.

"People are..."

Careful.

Eight billion people are about to enter your sentence.

Maybe narrow it.

Some people.

Many people.

Under certain conditions.

This person.

That institution.

Language again.

Precision can protect hope from stupidity.

I have been cynical about politics at times.

Easy target.

People say one thing.

Do another.

Money.

Power.

Tribal loyalty.

Narrative management.

You watch long enough and contempt becomes available.

But contempt is dangerous.

If I decide all political participation is corrupt, I hand institutions to people willing to participate.

Withdrawal becomes a political act whether I intend it or not.

Same with schools.

Teams.

Neighborhoods.

Families.

Someone has to enter the messy room.

Critics outside may be correct.

Creators still needed.

Chapter Thirteen again.

I don't need to worship politics to vote.

I don't need to believe politicians are saints to demand better ones.

I don't need faith in every institution to defend procedures that prevent concentrated power.

Low romanticism.

High participation.

That seems sane.

Same with baseball organizations.

I can criticize youth sports.

Money.

Showcases.

Travel schedules.

Adult ego.

Overuse.

Recruiting anxiety.

All real.

Then what?

Leave baseball?

Maybe sometimes.

Or coach differently.

Create a small environment where the kid remains visible.

Small radius.

Chapter Nine.

I cannot fix youth baseball nationally.

I can make Tuesday's practice less stupid.

That is enough to resist cynicism.

Cynicism loves scale.

Everything is broken.

Nothing can change.

The scale makes action ridiculous.

What can I do about humanity?

Very little.

What can I do with the kid in front of me?

Something.

Zoom in.

Again.

This applies to generosity.

I cannot eliminate poverty.

Can I help someone?

Yes.

Does that solve the system?

No.

Does systemic action matter too?

Yes.

Why must one invalidate the other?

Binary thinking again.

Local kindness without structural thought can be insufficient.

Structural thought without local kindness can become cold abstraction.

Both.

I think of the phrase:

Charity begins at home.

Maybe.

It should not end there.

But if I love humanity and everyone near me experiences me as impatient, something is off.

Chapter Nine already exposed that.

Cynicism can be similarly abstract.

Humans are terrible.

Which humans?

Your wife?

Your daughter?

Your mother?

The kid who stayed after practice to pick up baseballs?

The stranger who returned a wallet?

The nurse holding a patient's hand?

No.

The abstraction is darker than most encounters.

Interesting.

News contributes to this.

Not because news is lying by definition.

Because catastrophe is newsworthy.

Plane lands safely?

No headline.

Millions of parents get children home without abuse today?

No headline.

Neighbors help neighbors?

Occasional human-interest story.

Murder?

War?

Corruption?

Important.

Should be reported.

But if I consume only exceptional failure, my nervous system may begin treating exception as baseline.

That matters.

The mind estimates prevalence partly through availability.

Events easily recalled feel common.

You see ten stories of horrific behavior.

Humanity feels horrific.

Meanwhile ordinary cooperation is structurally invisible because ordinary cooperation is what allows most days to function.

That should enter the audit too.

The subway works partly because thousands of strangers do not attack each other.

Traffic works because most people follow most rules most of the time.

Money works because enough people honor transactions.

Neighborhoods work because people generally don't burn down every building they dislike.

Civilization's baseline contains enormous cooperation we barely notice.

Then one failure becomes headline.

Again, this does not minimize the failure.

It contextualizes the species.

Maybe civilization itself is evidence that humans are capable of sustained cooperation despite our capacity for atrocity.

Fragile evidence.

Still evidence.

I have seen enough kindness personally to reject total cynicism.

People helping after death.

Friends? Acquaintances? Family? People who show up.

Sometimes someone surprises you.

No transaction.

No audience.

Just kindness.

Quiet unseen moments apply morally too.

Most decency is not posted.

That matters.

The cynical explanation says:

Maybe they wanted to feel good about themselves.

Fine.

What if they did?

Chapter Eleven already ruined purity.

If helping another person also feels good, excellent design.

The beneficiary was still helped.

Motive mixture does not erase outcome.

I am less interested now in pure altruism.

Maybe it exists.

Maybe not.

I care more whether ego and care can coexist without ego consuming the act.

I can enjoy helping.

Good.

Do I need dependence afterward?

Different.

Cynicism also protects against grief.

If I never idealize anyone, their failure hurts less.

If I expect betrayal, betrayal confirms.

But the protection carries opportunity cost.

I never receive the full version of trust either.

That is expensive.

Trust is not believing betrayal impossible.

Trust is acting despite the possibility.

That makes trust courageous.

Same as love.

Love without risk is possession.

Trust without risk would be certainty.

Neither exists.

I want to teach kids something like that about teammates.

Trust doesn't mean your teammate never makes an error.

If trust required perfection, no team would have any.

Trust means after the error, you still expect him to want the next ball.

And he expects you not to abandon him.

That is a useful human model.

Three things give a baseball team its best chance:

Pitchers throw strikes.

Play defense.

Trust.

I keep returning to trust because it is the least mechanical.

A pitcher can practice command.

Defense can drill.

Trust emerges from repetitions of vulnerability.

You make an error.

Do they destroy you?

No.

You tell the truth.

Does Coach punish honesty?

Hopefully not.

You struggle.

Do teammates disappear?

Over time, the nervous system learns.

These people may be safe enough.

Not absolutely safe.

Enough.

Societies need versions of that too.

Trust institutions enough to cooperate.

Skepticism enough to inspect.

Too much trust:

corruption gets cover.

Too little:

coordination collapses.

Another tension.

Cynicism becomes socially dangerous when distrust becomes total.

No elections legitimate.

No expert trustworthy.

No institution credible.

No media truthful.

No person acts in good faith.

Then how do people coordinate?

They retreat to tribe.

The only trusted people are ours.

That can accelerate the very authoritarian psychology Chapter Fifteen warned about.

When general trust collapses, strong tribal leaders become attractive.

Interesting.

Cynicism can prepare the ground for domination.

I do not mean skeptical citizens should blindly trust institutions.

Quite the opposite.

Trust should be earned and revisable.

But universal suspicion is not critical thinking.

It's another form of certainty.

A person who distrusts everything can be manipulated as easily as someone who trusts everything.

Just tell him the official story is false.

He may assume the opposite is true.

That is not skepticism.

That's reverse obedience.

I have seen that pattern.

Mainstream says X.

Therefore X is false.

No.

Maybe X is false.

Investigate.

Reflexive contrarianism remains dependence.

Chapter Four.

Real skepticism is exhausting.

Evaluate evidence.

Source quality.

Incentives.

Counterevidence.

Admit uncertainty.

Cynicism is faster:

They're lying.

Done.

No wonder it spreads.

I have used cynicism that way.

Someone in power speaks.

My suspicion turns on immediately.

Sometimes appropriately.

But suspicion should begin investigation, not end it.

Otherwise prejudice toward institutions replaces deference to them.

Same intellectual failure, reversed.

I think about atrocities and propaganda.

People imagine propaganda as obvious lies.

Sometimes.

But effective propaganda may use selected truths.

Real grievances.

Real fears.

Then organize them toward hatred.

That is why cynicism about every institution becomes dangerous.

The propagandist says:

Everyone else lies.

Only we tell the truth.

A population exhausted by distrust may accept the certainty.

The refuge becomes a trap.

Again, small internal version:

Nobody understands me.

Only this group does.

Be careful.

Exclusive truth claims deserve scrutiny.

Political.

Religious.

Personal.

Even intellectual.

Especially when the group tells you that disagreement proves corruption.

Unfalsifiable loyalty.

I want to remain reachable by evidence.

That's maybe the simplest anti-cynicism practice.

Reachable.

Not gullible.

Not endlessly persuadable.

But there must be some possible evidence that changes my view.

If nothing could, belief has become identity.

I also want to remain reachable emotionally.

That may be harder.

Can another person's decency surprise me?

Can someone I dislike do something admirable without my immediately explaining it away?

Can someone I admire disappoint me without becoming worthless?

Both require open categories.

Chapter Six.

Cynicism flattens people.

He's corrupt.

She's fake.

They're all selfish.

Human beings become closed cases.

I don't want that.

Closed cases cannot surprise.

And surprise is one of life's better gifts.

My daughter may surprise me.

Players surprise me.

People I underestimated.

I have been wrong about character before.

Sometimes positively.

A kid I thought lacked commitment becomes dependable.

Someone I thought shallow says something profound.

Someone difficult behaves generously.

If I become cynical, I lose the ability to update.

That is intellectually expensive.

This connects to forgiveness.

If people cannot change, why forgive?

Why rehabilitate?

Why teach?

Why coach?

The entire concept of getting better assumes some plasticity.

Not unlimited.

People repeat patterns.

Some never change.

But possibility exists.

Otherwise nineteen confessions are masturbation.

I don't believe that.

I believe behavior can change because I've seen change.

In others.

Some in me.

Not enough.

Enough to continue.

Cynicism can also excuse my own failures.

Humans are selfish.

So what did you expect from me?

Everyone lies.

Everyone cheats.

Everyone becomes controlling.

No.

Human imperfection does not eliminate standards.

If anything, knowing tendencies creates responsibility to build guardrails.

That is the whole project.

The phrase "that's just human nature" bothers me when used as surrender.

Aggression is human.

So is restraint.

Tribalism is human.

So is cross-tribal cooperation.

Self-interest is human.

So is sacrifice.

Cruelty is human.

So is care.

Which part gets practiced, rewarded, institutionalized, modeled, and constrained matters.

Human nature may supply ingredients.

Culture cooks.

Institutions set kitchens.

Individuals still choose within constraints.

Again, everything matters.

I do not know whether humanity is progressing morally overall.

That is too large a claim for me to make casually.

Technology expands capacity in both directions.

Medicine saves.

Weapons scale destruction.

Communication connects.

Algorithms can divide.

Knowledge expands.

So does our ability to manipulate.

Maybe human nature remains roughly itself while tools become more powerful.

If so, self-confrontation becomes more important, not less.

A frightened tribal animal with nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence deserves an internal audit.

That includes all of us.

The twenty-first century gives ordinary people powers historical rulers did not possess.

Broadcast globally.

Access immense information.

Create misinformation.

Organize.

Harass.

Observe.

Record.

Manipulate images.

Our moral development may not have scaled at the same speed as our tools.

That should concern us.

Not enough to become cynical.

Enough to become serious.

A child with a smartphone can humiliate another child before thousands.

When I was young, embarrassment had geographic limits.

Now a mistake can travel.

The technology did not create cruelty.

It multiplied reach.

This is why empathy and restraint need updating for 2026.

The old human impulses have new machinery.

The same is true of political rage.

Once, the man angry at the bar had six listeners.

Now potentially six million.

The megaphone has become cheap.

Self-control did not.

That is a dangerous mismatch.

Maybe this book is partly about reducing the distance between technological power and human self-awareness.

At one tiny scale.

One person.

Me.

Again, insignificance.

Don't get grandiose.

But the issue matters.

I sometimes imagine what Piri Thomas's streets would look like now.

The physical street remains.

But another street overlays it.

Digital.

Always open.

No bedtime.

No geographic boundary.

Status measured in followers.

Arguments permanent.

Tribes available twenty-four hours.

Humiliation scalable.

The old hunger for belonging now optimized by machines that learn which emotion keeps you looking.

What would that do to a young boy trying to become a man?

I don't fully know.

But the basic self-confrontation becomes urgent.

Who is choosing?

Me?

My fear?

My tribe?

The algorithm?

Cynicism itself sells well online.

Everything is scam.

Everyone is lying.

The system is rigged.

Watch this video and I'll explain what they don't want you to know.

That sentence structure should trigger suspicion.

Maybe the speaker has discovered something.

Maybe.

But secret knowledge flatters the audience.

You are not sheep.

You see.

Same ego from Chapter Four.

Be careful.

The antidote is not institutional obedience.

It's patient verification.

Less exciting.

More useful.

Cynicism also destroys gratitude.

If every kindness has hidden motive, why say thank you?

If every opportunity is exploitation, why appreciate it?

If every relationship is transaction, love becomes accounting.

I don't want that world.

Not because transactions don't exist.

They do.

Because reality contains more.

There are things people have done for me that I cannot reduce cleanly to exchange.

Time.

Patience.

Second chances.

Love.

I hope I have given some too.

Maybe ego mixed in.

Fine.

Human motives are soup.

The nourishment still counts.

I think gratitude is one form of anti-cynicism.

Not gratitude as denial.

Not:

Everything happens for a reason.

No.

Gratitude says:

This good thing was not guaranteed.

Chapter Seven.

I noticed it.

That practice retrains attention.

Cynicism notices threat.

Gratitude notices gift.

I need both eyes.

The atrocities matter.

Never look away.

The kindness matters.

Do not look away from that either.

That is perhaps the confession.

I am capable of selective attention based on mood.

When bitter, evidence of human goodness looks naïve.

When hopeful, evidence of cruelty feels inconvenient.

I want both columns open.

Maybe truth itself requires emotional courage because evidence can threaten the worldview currently protecting me.

Cynicism protects me from hope.

Hope protects me from despair.

Both can distort if they become identities.

I want something else:

Open-eyed hope.

Open-eyed hope says:

People may betray you.

Love them carefully anyway.

Institutions may corrupt.

Build checks and participate anyway.

A player may fail.

Teach him anyway.

Your child may ignore your advice.

Be available anyway.

Your writing may disappear.

Write anyway.

You will die.

Love anyway.

That word is coming closer.

Love.

Part VI.

Maintaining an open heart in a ruined world.

Maybe that's the real challenge.

Not whether I can see ruin.

That is easy.

Can I see it and remain open?

Cynicism calls openness foolish.

Sometimes it is.

Trusting someone who repeatedly abuses you is not virtue.

Returning to unsafe conditions is not open-heartedness.

Boundaries matter.

Open heart does not mean open gate.

That distinction is crucial.

I can refuse access without hatred.

I can distrust behavior without deciding humanity is hopeless.

I can condemn someone and still resist dehumanizing them.

I can protect myself and remain capable of loving other people.

That seems like the path.

Hard.

Bitterness wants company.

Once one person hurts me, bitterness whispers generalization.

See?

People.

No.

One person.

Maybe several.

Keep the scale accurate.

That is self-defense against cynicism.

I think of grief.

People sometimes become cynical after loss.

Life took something.

Why invest again?

Because loss proves attachment is dangerous.

Correct.

It also proves attachment mattered.

Both.

If I avoid love to avoid grief, grief has already taken the future too.

That feels unacceptable.

I have no guarantee I could live that principle after catastrophic loss.

Let's remain humble.

Pain can overwhelm philosophy.

But I want the orientation now.

Do not pre-grieve life to make eventual grief easier.

That bargain probably does not work.

The same with aging.

I can become cynical about younger generations.

Easy.

They do things differently.

Technology.

Language.

Work.

Commitment.

Then every irritating example becomes evidence of decline.

"Kids today."

There it is.

Again.

Maybe some trends are genuinely worse.

Analyze them.

But every generation thinks the next one lost something.

Meanwhile the next generation sees the previous one's blind spots.

Both probably right.

History moves.

I can critique without contempt.

Contempt is where cynicism gets corrosive.

It does not say:

This behavior is wrong.

It says:

These people are beneath consideration.

That emotional move makes cruelty easier.

I want to be very careful with contempt.

Including toward people whose politics repel me.

Some ideas deserve contempt?

Maybe.

But directing contempt toward entire categories of humans is dangerous.

I can strongly reject an ideology while remaining aware that individuals holding it have histories, fears, families, contradictions.

That does not mean endless conversation.

Some people are bad-faith.

Some dangerous.

Boundaries.

Still human.

Again, no equivalence.

Humanity.

This is one reason I resist the refuge of cynicism.

Cynicism can become moral laziness.

I no longer have to do the harder work of distinguishing.

Everyone sucks.

Case closed.

But the world is not one case.

It is billions.

I think self-confrontation fights cynicism because it reminds me that I am capable of disappointing myself too.

If I can recognize flaws in me without concluding I am irredeemable, maybe I can offer the same possibility elsewhere.

Not trust.

Possibility.

If I say:

I have been arrogant.

But I can improve.

Then I must allow logically that another arrogant person might.

Not guaranteed.

Possible.

That makes permanent condemnation harder.

Good.

There are people who may never change.

Accept that.

Hope should not become denial.

I do not need to wait forever for someone's next self.

I can leave.

Set boundary.

Protect.

But I don't need metaphysical certainty that the person is forever incapable of goodness to justify the boundary.

Their current behavior is enough.

That is freeing.

I can say:

I hope you become better.

You cannot do it near me.

That is both open-hearted and boundaried.

I like that.

Cynicism also whispers that acts of goodness are too small.

What does one coach matter?

One parent?

One vote?

One book?

One apology?

Against history?

Almost nothing.

Correct.

Chapter Nine.

Spectacular insignificance.

But "almost nothing" is not nothing to the person directly affected.

Zoom in.

A coach refuses to humiliate a kid.

History unchanged.

Kid's afternoon changed.

A father listens instead of controls.

Human condition unsolved.

Relationship changed.

Someone returns a wallet.

Capitalism survives.

One person's day improved.

Maybe that is enough scale.

I no longer need goodness to defeat evil globally before it counts.

That's another impossible standard.

Goodness can be local.

Temporary.

Unrecorded.

Still real.

This may be the most practical defense against despair:

Do the next humane thing within your reach.

Not because it solves the system.

Because it is available.

Then perhaps work on systems too.

Both scales.

I think of my books.

Free.

No paywall.

Why?

Partly because I want access.

Partly because money is not my primary objective with this writing.

Does that make it selfless?

No.

Chapter Eleven would laugh.

I get something.

Clarification.

Expression.

Maybe recognition.

Fine.

But if someone receives something useful without paying, that outcome remains.

Mixed motive.

Real effect.

That is enough.

I do not want purity preventing contribution.

Cynicism says:

Everyone has motives.

Therefore generosity isn't real.

I say:

Of course everyone has motives.

Did anyone get helped?

Start there.

Maybe the refusal of cynicism is not a belief about human goodness.

It is a discipline of interpretation.

Do not generalize faster than evidence.

Do not use betrayal to close all future doors.

Do not use history's worst examples to erase ordinary decency.

Do not use ordinary decency to minimize historical evil.

Hold both.

Again.

There is a philosophical humility in admitting I cannot know the species' final verdict.

Are humans good?

Bad?

Both?

Wrong question maybe.

Humans do.

They choose.

They respond.

They build.

They destroy.

The category may be too large for one adjective.

Chapter One's cracked mirror again.

Maybe I don't need a verdict on humanity to love individual humans.

That feels simpler.

I can love my wife.

My daughter.

My mother.

People I coach.

People I encounter.

No species theory required.

Maybe love begins locally and refuses to become naïve about scale.

There is something deeply moving to me about human beings helping one another precisely because the universe does not require it.

Chapter Seven.

The universe is indifferent.

A person isn't.

That act becomes more valuable in an indifferent world.

If kindness were automatic, it would not be moral.

Choice matters.

The same species that builds torture chambers builds pediatric hospitals.

That fact does not balance a ledger.

One does not cancel the other.

It reveals range.

Terrible range.

Beautiful range.

We live inside it.

What determines direction?

Everything.

Culture.

Institutions.

Leadership.

Fear.

Economics.

History.

Family.

Education.

Chance.

Character.

Choice.

I cannot control most.

I can influence a little.

That is enough responsibility.

Confession Number Seventeen:

I have been tempted by cynicism.

I have enjoyed the feeling of seeing through things.

I have assumed bad motives too quickly because bad motives protect me from disappointment.

I have generalized from corruption.

From hypocrisy.

From betrayal.

I have occasionally confused skepticism with wisdom and pessimism with realism.

I know enough history to understand how horrifying people can become.

And I know enough ordinary human beings to reject the claim that horror is the entire story.

So I refuse the refuge.

Not because I am optimistic.

Because cynicism is too easy.

I want a harder position.

Trust provisionally.

Verify.

Love without guarantees.

Set boundaries without hatred.

Condemn cruelty without convincing myself I am incapable of it.

Participate in institutions without worshiping them.

Criticize without abandoning.

Hope without predicting.

Act without believing the action will solve everything.

That is less comfortable than cynicism.

Good.

Comfort has not been the objective.

The world may be ruined in ways I cannot repair.

Some damage is permanent.

Some histories cannot be undone.

Some people will remain cruel.

Some institutions will fail.

Some wars will happen.

Some children will suffer.

Writing those sentences hurts.

They should.

But pain does not logically require despair.

That conclusion is optional.

I think despair sometimes feels like respect for suffering.

How can you be hopeful after this?

Fair question.

Maybe hope is not disrespect.

Maybe hope is refusing to let suffering dictate every future action.

The dead do not necessarily need me to become dead inside.

Again, I would be careful saying that to someone actively grieving.

This is a confession to myself.

Not prescription.

If catastrophe comes, I may become cynical.

I don't know.

I am writing from where I stand now.

That humility matters.

People in pain do not owe consistency to philosophers.

But while I have the capacity, I want to practice openness.

Maybe practice matters before the crisis.

Like baseball.

Quiet unseen moments.

Build the habit before the game gets difficult.

What does that practice look like?

Notice one decent act.

Not inspirational propaganda.

Just evidence.

Give someone an interpretation slightly more charitable than the one ego offers immediately.

Not infinitely charitable.

Slightly.

Ask what evidence would change my suspicion.

Help without needing the act to become significant.

Call someone.

Thank someone.

Let someone surprise me.

Small repetitions.

An open heart may be trained.

Cynicism is trained too.

Repeat contempt.

Consume outrage.

Assume motive.

Mock hope.

Eventually the posture hardens.

I do not want that body.

I have seen older people become bitter.

Sometimes with reason.

Life disappointed them.

People failed them.

Their bodies changed.

Institutions moved.

Culture moved.

Children moved away psychologically or physically.

The temptation is to turn loss into verdict.

Everything used to be better.

Everyone now is worse.

I don't want to end there.

Maybe aging well includes remaining persuadable by beauty.

That sentence matters to me.

Remaining persuadable by beauty.

A kid laughing.

A good baseball play.

My daughter telling me something I didn't know.

My wife.

A meal.

A city street.

Music.

Some stranger doing something decent.

Not because beauty erases atrocity.

Because atrocity does not deserve exclusive jurisdiction over attention.

That may be my resistance.

Look directly at horror.

Then look directly at love.

Refuse to let either become propaganda against the other.

Humanity has earned skepticism.

It has also earned wonder.

Both evidence columns are thick.

I do not know the final sum.

Maybe there isn't one.

Maybe there is no species report card.

Fine.

I can still choose what I reinforce.

If I believe cruelty is possible, build restraints.

If I believe generosity is possible, create opportunities.

If I believe fear can dehumanize, challenge fear.

If I believe people can change, leave pathways back where safe.

If I believe power can corrupt, distribute it.

If I believe trust can be betrayed, don't make trust blind.

This is hope with engineering.

I like that better than optimism.

There will be no final victory over human nature.

We will not solve ourselves.

That confession is approaching.

But maybe civilization itself is an ongoing refusal to surrender entirely to our worst capacities.

Laws.

Norms.

Families.

Schools.

Art.

Sports.

Conversations.

Imperfect structures trying to make cooperation more likely.

They fail.

We revise.

They fail differently.

We revise again.

No finish line.

How To Get Better.

Not How To Become Good Forever.

Maybe that's why I still coach.

If I were truly cynical, development would be absurd.

Why teach a kid trust if people are untrustworthy?

Why teach responsibility if everyone acts selfishly?

Why write nineteen confessions if humans do not change?

Yet I keep showing up.

That behavior may reveal what I believe more accurately than my darker moods.

I believe possibility remains.

A twelve-year-old makes an error.

He looks toward the dugout.

For a few seconds, an adult has power over what the error means.

Failure?

Humiliation?

Information?

Next pitch?

I cannot control the boy's entire future.

Spectacularly insignificant.

But I can choose the next sentence.

That is not nothing.

Maybe civilization is built from next sentences.

One person refusing the easy cruel one.

Then another.

No guarantee.

No cosmic applause.

Just friction against the worst impulse.

The cynic asks:

Do you really think that changes the world?

Probably not.

Not alone.

But that question has become less powerful over me.

I do not need every act to change the world.

Sometimes changing the room is enough.

That is Confession Number Seventeen.

I know what humans can do.

I refuse to look away.

I also refuse to let the evidence of atrocity become an excuse for emotional withdrawal.

I refuse to become proud of expecting the worst.

I refuse to call contempt wisdom.

I refuse to require goodness to be pure before recognizing it.

I refuse to let betrayal turn every future person into the betrayer.

I refuse to love blindly.

And I refuse to stop loving because blindness is dangerous.

That tension is mine.

Maybe the open heart is not a soft heart.

Maybe it is scar tissue that remains flexible.

That image feels closer.

Not untouched.

Not naïve.

Scarred.

Aware.

Still moving.

I hope that is possible.

Notice the word.

Hope.

Not know.

Hope.

There was a time I would have wanted a stronger ending.

Something certain.

Something victorious.

But cynicism and optimism both want the same thing from me:

certainty about the future.

I cannot give either one that.

So I will give them something smaller.

Tomorrow, I will try again not to become what frightens me about humanity.

And I will try again not to become so afraid of humanity that I miss what is beautiful about it.

That is enough for one day.

EIGHTEEN: STAYING OPEN-MINDED HURTS—IT REQUIRES LETTING OLD VERSIONS OF MYSELF DIE DAILY

Confession #18: I Say I Want the Truth, but Sometimes What I Really Want Is Better Evidence for What I Already Believe

I like to think I am open-minded.

That should immediately make me suspicious.

People rarely introduce themselves by saying:

I am closed-minded.

We say:

I listen to both sides.

I question everything.

I think for myself.

I don't follow tribes.

I care about evidence.

I can change my mind.

Good.

I say versions of those things too.

But the real test of open-mindedness does not occur when I am examining somebody else's beliefs.

It occurs when evidence walks into the room carrying a knife and asks me to cut away part of myself.

That is different.

Because beliefs are rarely just beliefs.

They become biography.

Identity.

Memory.

Relationships.

Pride.

Status.

Years invested.

Things I taught my daughter.

Things I told baseball players.

Things I wrote.

Things I defended.

Things I criticized other people for not understanding.

And now new evidence arrives.

Quietly.

Without caring how much I have invested.

And says:

Jose, you may have been wrong.

That hurts.

Not metaphorically.

Sometimes I can feel it in my body.

A tightening.

An immediate counterargument.

A desire to explain context.

A sentence beginning with:

"Yeah, but..."

There he is.

My defense attorney.

Chapter Two.

Still employed.

I used to imagine open-mindedness as intellectual hospitality.

Keep the door open.

Let ideas enter.

Listen.

Consider.

Beautiful.

But ideas do not merely visit.

Some rearrange the furniture.

Some tell you the house was built incorrectly.

Some point toward a wall and say:

That thing you've been calling a window for twenty years?

It's a mirror.

You've been looking at yourself.

Now what?

It is easy to be open-minded about things that do not threaten me.

Tell me Pluto is not technically a planet.

Fine.

I had no emotional investment in Pluto's classification.

Tell me some historical date I remembered is wrong.

Okay.

Correct it.

But tell me that a coaching method I have used for decades may have created an unintended consequence?

Different nervous system.

Tell me something I thought was discipline may have occasionally been control.

Different.

Tell me advice I gave my daughter was more about reducing my anxiety than improving her life.

Different.

Tell me a political argument I considered nuanced contains a blind spot benefiting people situated like me.

Different.

Now information has become personal.

That is where open-mindedness earns its name.

The mind says:

Evaluate the evidence.

The ego says:

Evaluate the consequences of accepting the evidence.

Those are different assignments.

The first asks:

Is this true?

The second asks:

What happens to me if this is true?

My reputation?

My identity?

My authority?

My previous decisions?

My story?

No wonder human beings resist changing their minds.

We are sometimes not protecting the idea.

We are protecting the architecture built around it.

This is why facts alone often fail to persuade.

We imagine another person's belief as a loose object.

Remove bad fact.

Insert good fact.

Done.

But the belief may be load-bearing.

Pull it out and other parts of the person's identity begin shaking.

Family.

Religion.

Politics.

Class.

Profession.

Community.

Masculinity.

Self-worth.

Maybe even memories of someone they love.

Now the person isn't debating a proposition.

He is defending structural integrity.

That doesn't make the belief true.

It helps explain the resistance.

And if I understand that in others, I should recognize it in myself.

There are ideas I hold because evidence supports them.

There are ideas I hold because I arrived at them through experience.

There are ideas I hold because people I respect hold them.

There are ideas I hold because opposing ideas irritate me.

There are ideas I hold because they make me feel independent.

There are ideas I hold because they allow me to imagine myself as the guy who sees nuance while everybody else is trapped in binary thinking.

That last one deserves special attention.

Because even anti-tribalism can become a tribe.

I can become proud of not belonging.

Interesting contradiction.

Everyone else chooses sides.

Jose sees both.

Look at Jose.

So nuanced.

So independent.

What happens then when one side is simply more correct about a particular question?

Will I still split the difference because "both sides" has become my identity?

That would not be nuance.

That would be vanity disguised as balance.

The middle is not automatically true.

Chapter Four should have made that clear.

If one person says two plus two equals four and another says five, nuance does not require four and a half.

Sometimes evidence points strongly in one direction.

Open-mindedness means allowing that too.

I don't get intellectual points for manufacturing ambiguity where little exists.

That is one of my blind spots.

I distrust certainty so much that uncertainty itself can become seductive.

Maybe.

Perhaps.

On the other hand.

Depends.

Useful words.

Until they become hiding places.

Sometimes I have to say:

Based on the evidence I have, this is what I think.

Then accept responsibility for the position.

Nuance should sharpen judgment.

Not permanently postpone it.

Open-mindedness is not having no beliefs.

A mind permanently unable to conclude anything is not open.

It is uncommitted.

I need working conclusions.

Baseball demands them.

Life demands them.

Do we steal?

Do we pull the pitcher?

Do I spend the money?

Do I send the message?

Do I vote for this person?

Do I trust this claim?

Eventually:

Decision.

The question is whether the decision becomes prison.

I want beliefs written in pencil.

Some darker than others.

Some almost permanent.

Murdering innocent people is wrong.

Dark pencil.

Humiliating children for entertainment is wrong.

Dark pencil.

My preferred way to teach a hitter?

Lighter.

My interpretation of someone's motive?

Very light.

My prediction about the economy?

Maybe don't even use pencil.

Use chalk.

Different beliefs deserve different levels of confidence.

That sounds obvious.

Humans don't always behave that way.

We can hold a rumor with the emotional intensity of a moral principle.

Social media has industrialized this.

A clip.

Twelve seconds.

No context.

Immediate certainty.

He is terrible.

She is lying.

They hate us.

Outrage first.

Investigation maybe never.

The modern information environment rewards conclusion speed.

Being first feels valuable.

Being certain feels shareable.

"I don't know yet" does not travel well.

No tribe rallies around:

The evidence is incomplete and I need more time.

Terrible slogan.

Maybe an important one.

I want to become more comfortable saying it.

I don't know.

I haven't read enough.

I saw the clip but not the full context.

That sounds plausible, but I can't verify it.

I used to think X. I'm reconsidering.

Those sentences can feel weak.

They are actually expensive.

They cost status in environments where confidence is currency.

There is another cost.

Changing my mind can disappoint my tribe.

Even if I claim not to have one.

We all have communities.

People who know us.

Expectations.

If I change position, somebody may say:

What happened to you?

You're becoming one of them.

That phrase tells me something.

One of them.

Chapter Seventeen.

The category waits.

Sometimes people do change beliefs because of social pressure rather than evidence.

That is real.

But sometimes the accusation of betrayal is itself social pressure designed to prevent reconsideration.

Every tribe has mechanisms for keeping members intellectually home.

Mockery.

Exclusion.

Suspicion.

Purity tests.

We discussed that in Chapter Fifteen.

The external tyrant needs help from the internal one.

The internal voice says:

Don't say that.

People will misunderstand.

Maybe.

Don't admit you changed.

You'll look inconsistent.

Maybe.

Don't acknowledge their point.

They'll think they won.

There.

Chapter Twelve.

Winning again.

What if they did win the argument?

Wonderful.

If their argument moved me closer to truth, I received something.

Why should that humiliate me?

Because I had fused being correct with being worthy.

That's the problem.

I want to be the kind of person who can say:

You were right about that. I was wrong.

Full stop.

No immediate autobiography.

No explanation of why my error was understandable.

Maybe context later.

First:

You were right.

I was wrong.

Those four words are remarkably difficult for intelligent people.

Maybe because intelligence gives us better escape routes.

The more articulate I become, the easier self-deception can become.

Chapter Two.

I can construct a beautiful explanation for why I was not exactly wrong.

Context.

Semantics.

Different framing.

Temporal conditions.

Sure.

Sometimes those distinctions matter.

Other times I'm just laundering the error through vocabulary.

My best explanations are often sophisticated excuses.

That confession has followed me through the entire book.

It belongs here especially.

Open-mindedness requires knowing when to stop explaining.

I think about coaching.

Thirty-plus years around baseball can become authority.

It can also become baggage.

Experience teaches.

Experience also fossilizes.

I have seen things work.

That matters.

But yesterday's success can become tomorrow's superstition if I stop examining why it worked.

Maybe the kids changed.

Training changed.

Equipment changed.

Information changed.

Maybe I misunderstood the causal mechanism from the beginning.

Years do not automatically equal wisdom.

Sometimes they equal repetition.

There is a dangerous sentence older coaches use:

"I've been doing this for thirty years."

Okay.

Have you been learning for thirty years?

Or repeating one year thirty times?

I need to ask myself that before asking anyone else.

The young coach may know something I don't.

That can sting.

He has fewer scars.

Less experience.

Maybe he has better information.

Both can be true.

I know things he doesn't.

He knows things I don't.

If my seniority becomes evidence in every disagreement, I am not using experience.

I am using rank.

Chapter Fifteen.

I want to remain coachable.

Funny word for a coach.

Maybe essential.

A coach who cannot be coached has completed his development.

Which means decline has probably begun.

Players teach me.

Not always intentionally.

Their confusion tells me my explanation failed.

Their boredom tells me practice design may be weak.

Their questions reveal assumptions.

Their resistance sometimes exposes my rigidity.

Sometimes their resistance is simply resistance.

Kids are not secret sages.

They can be lazy.

Distracted.

Wrong.

So can I.

Again, no romanticism.

But data is data.

If thirteen kids misunderstand the same instruction, perhaps I do not have thirteen comprehension problems.

Maybe I have one communication problem.

Mine.

That is open-mindedness made practical.

I think parenting is even harder because the emotional investment is greater.

You spend years trying to protect a child.

Then the child becomes an adult.

Your expertise depreciates.

Not your love.

Your jurisdiction.

That distinction hurts.

When my daughter was ten, I could know more about what she needed in many situations.

At twenty-two?

Different.

I may still see things.

Experience matters.

But she possesses data I do not.

Her body.

Her relationships.

Her ambitions.

Her anxieties.

Her workplace.

Her generation.

Her life.

The ratio changes.

If I fail to update, love becomes outdated governance.

I have had to learn that advice can be accurate and still unnecessary.

That's painful for someone who enjoys thinking through problems.

I can see a possible mistake.

Maybe she needs to make it.

Maybe it isn't a mistake.

Maybe I'm wrong.

Three possibilities.

The father in me wants to reduce uncertainty.

Chapter Fourteen.

The open-minded father asks:

What if her interpretation deserves equal or greater weight because she is the one living it?

That's growth.

Still uncomfortable.

There is grief inside this.

I don't think we discuss that enough.

Changing your mind means losing something.

Even when the new belief is better.

You lose the old certainty.

Sometimes an old community.

Sometimes an image of yourself.

Sometimes a story about your parents.

Your country.

Your profession.

Your childhood.

Your marriage.

Your own behavior.

Truth can be liberating.

It can also be bereavement.

Maybe that is why I used "die daily" in the confession.

Not literal death.

Identity death.

Small funerals.

The version of me who believed that.

Gone.

The version who needed this.

Gone.

The version who thought he understood.

Gone.

Not completely.

Ghosts remain.

They speak.

I carry previous versions of Jose with me.

The boy.

The baseball player.

The young father.

The businessman.

The coach who thought intensity communicated caring automatically.

The man who believed explaining something well meant the other person should understand.

The critic.

The fixer.

The person who wanted to control outcomes because uncertainty felt irresponsible.

None disappeared.

They became layers.

Some days an older layer answers before the current one.

Growth is strange because the old self never receives the memo completely.

You can intellectually change and emotionally remain years behind.

I know something.

Then under pressure, I behave according to the previous version.

That frustrates me.

But maybe integration takes repetition.

Chapter Sixteen.

Developmental time.

Even for me.

I can forgive the lag without excusing it.

I like that distinction.

I know better.

I didn't do better.

Okay.

Investigate.

Practice.

Next pitch.

Open-mindedness toward myself means allowing new evidence about myself too.

That is harder than changing opinions about politics.

Someone tells me:

You interrupt.

My first response?

Maybe I do.

Someone says:

You made that conversation about yourself.

Ouch.

Maybe.

You were too intense.

Maybe.

You were trying to help, but it felt controlling.

That one.

That one can get through the armor.

Because intention and impact separate.

Again.

My mind immediately produces evidence for the defense.

But I meant...

I was only...

What I was trying to do...

Stop.

Maybe later.

First ask:

What did it feel like from where you were standing?

Chapter Fifteen.

That question can kill an old version of me.

Good.

The old version says:

If my intention was good, I am good.

The newer version says:

Your intention is one piece of evidence.

Impact is another.

Context another.

Pattern another.

Listen.

No total acquittal.

No total condemnation.

Internal audit.

I wonder how many people say they want honest feedback and then train everyone around them not to give it.

"Be honest with me."

Person is honest.

We become defensive.

Explain.

Withdraw.

Punish subtly.

Next time they say:

Everything's fine.

Then we complain nobody tells us the truth.

We created the silence.

Chapter Fifteen again.

If I want an open mind, I need to make contradiction survivable.

Externally and internally.

Someone contradicts me.

Relationship survives.

Evidence contradicts me.

Identity survives.

I contradict my previous self.

Dignity survives.

That is essential.

Otherwise consistency becomes psychological survival.

People accuse politicians of flip-flopping.

Sometimes correctly.

Some change positions opportunistically.

But our culture also punishes genuine revision.

Ten years ago you said X.

Today you say Y.

Gotcha.

Wait.

Isn't changing one's mind sometimes exactly what we want?

The question should be:

Why did it change?

New evidence?

New incentives?

Political convenience?

Experience?

Investigate.

But inconsistency itself is not proof of corruption.

A person who never changes across decades may be consistent.

Or impermeable.

I would hate to be judged in 2026 by every thought I held in 1986.

Not because all were shameful.

Because I was nineteen.

If forty years of experience leave every belief untouched, what exactly was the experience for?

The internet complicates this.

Old selves no longer die quietly.

They are archived.

A sentence.

Photo.

Post.

Interview.

Everything can be excavated.

Maybe accountability improves.

Good.

But permanent archives can make evolution dangerous.

If every past mistake remains eternally prosecutable, people learn reputation management rather than intellectual growth.

Chapter Fifteen's path back again.

I want a culture where we can say:

Yes, I believed that.

I don't anymore.

Here is what changed.

That should sometimes increase credibility.

Not always destroy it.

Of course revision can become performative.

People announce growth because growth earns social capital.

"I've done the work."

Maybe.

Behavior will tell us.

Again, slogans do not write constitutions.

Repetition does.

I do not want to perform open-mindedness either.

Reading opposing views is not enough if I only read them looking for flaws.

That's opposition research.

Not curiosity.

Do I ever read something I disagree with and ask:

What is the strongest thing here?

What does this explain that my framework doesn't?

What evidence would make this view reasonable?

That is harder.

Steel-manning.

Useful concept.

But even that can become intellectual sport.

Look how generously I can reconstruct your stupid argument.

Ego survives everything.

Amazing creature.

Maybe genuine curiosity has a bodily quality.

For a moment, I am not preparing my response.

I actually want to know.

Rare.

Beautiful.

I want more of that.

This matters politically.

I have spent much of my adult life suspicious of binary partisan framing.

I still am.

But non-partisanship itself cannot exempt me from evidence.

If one political actor behaves worse in a particular circumstance, saying "both sides" to protect my identity as balanced is dishonest.

If both genuinely share a flaw, say that.

If they differ materially, say that.

Objectivity is not symmetry.

That sentence deserves bold type.

Objectivity is not symmetry.

I want to remember it.

Nuance does not promise equal blame.

It promises examination.

Sometimes examination produces asymmetry.

Fine.

Truth owes no tribe equal criticism.

The same applies to social questions.

Sometimes I may be so determined to understand every perspective that I unintentionally center the perspective with more power.

Context matters.

History matters.

Who can impose consequences matters.

Chapter Fifteen.

Holding two perspectives does not mean pretending the power relationship is equal.

That is false balance.

I have blind spots.

Of course.

The difficult part is that a true blind spot is invisible from inside.

I cannot simply introspect my way into seeing everything.

I need other people.

Different experiences.

Different ages.

Different classes.

Different backgrounds.

Different expertise.

People who do not share my incentives.

That is humbling for an autodidact.

I value teaching myself.

I should.

Autodidacticism gave me freedom.

Books.

Questions.

Curiosity.

I did not need institutional permission to investigate something.

But the self-taught person has a special danger.

He chooses his syllabus.

And the person choosing the syllabus is the same person whose blind spots the syllabus is supposed to correct.

Interesting problem.

I can read widely.

But who decided what "widely" means?

Me.

I can challenge myself.

But who chooses the challenge?

Me.

I can declare myself independent.

According to whose assessment?

Mine.

So the autodidact needs friction.

People.

Evidence.

Editors.

Critics.

Experts.

Young people.

Old people.

Sometimes institutions.

Self-teaching cannot become self-certification.

That confession matters personally.

I have written books.

Free books.

I think through philosophy, economics, baseball, politics, human behavior.

I am not formally trained in every field I enter.

Obviously.

That can be strength.

I ask naïve questions specialists may overlook.

It can also be weakness.

I may not know what I don't know.

So intellectual humility is not decorative.

It is structural.

I can borrow from Nietzsche.

Frankl.

Popper.

William James.

Proust.

Camus.

Wittgenstein.

Whoever helps me think.

But quoting thinkers does not transfer their intelligence to me.

Important.

A philosopher's name can become intellectual camouflage.

Chapter Three.

If I cannot explain the idea plainly, maybe I don't understand it.

If the philosopher becomes authority replacing evidence, I have built another church.

Nietzsche's will to power is particularly vulnerable to misuse.

I can take what helps my self-confrontation without pretending I have settled Nietzsche scholarship.

Frankl can illuminate meaning without becoming a slogan for telling suffering people to find purpose.

Popper can sharpen falsifiability without making every human question a laboratory experiment.

Borrow carefully.

Return what doesn't fit.

An autodidact should probably write in pencil more than most.

I like that.

Open-mindedness also requires accepting expertise without worshiping experts.

That balance became harder in recent years.

Experts can be wrong.

Institutions can fail.

Consensus can shift.

All true.

And expertise remains real.

A person who has studied a narrow field for twenty years generally knows things I don't.

Both.

The existence of expert error does not make my afternoon of internet research equivalent.

That should not be controversial.

Yet ego likes leveling.

I can question the doctor without pretending to be one.

Question the economist without pretending one article makes me an economist.

Question the baseball analytics model while understanding what the model actually measures.

Ask.

Probe.

Verify.

But respect accumulated knowledge.

Intellectual democracy does not mean every opinion has equal evidentiary weight.

The inverse matters too.

Credentialed people can become closed-minded because status protects them.

"I am the expert."

Maybe.

Show me the evidence.

Authority matters.

Not absolute.

Again.

I want neither credential worship nor anti-intellectual vanity.

Permanent tension.

Chapter Five laughs from somewhere.

The pain of open-mindedness becomes sharpest when moral identity is involved.

Imagine discovering that something I did believing it helpful actually hurt someone.

What now?

There are two temptations.

First:

Deny the harm.

Second:

Convert the harm into proof that I am terrible.

Both center me.

Interesting.

The person harmed disappears while I decide whether I am innocent or evil.

Maybe a better response:

I did harm.

Can I repair?

What should change?

That is less dramatic.

More useful.

Self-condemnation can be another ego performance.

Look how terrible I am.

Still me at center.

Sometimes apology requires getting over myself enough to focus on the other person.

I am sorry.

No demand for immediate forgiveness.

No request that they reassure me I'm actually a good person.

That is hard.

Maybe the old self dies when I no longer need to preserve its innocence.

I can love the younger version of myself without acquitting him of everything.

He knew less.

He was afraid.

He was intense.

He did good things.

He made mistakes.

All true.

I do not need to prosecute him forever.

I also do not need to rewrite the record.

That feels healthy.

I think of the Bronx.

Brooklyn.

Baseball fields.

Businesses.

Family.

All the environments that built versions of me.

I carry their languages.

Expectations.

Survival strategies.

Pride.

Maybe some strategies that were adaptive in one environment become maladaptive later.

That happens.

A trait that protects a boy can constrain a man.

Hypervigilance.

Aggression.

Independence.

Distrust.

Intensity.

Whatever.

Growth may require thanking the old strategy before retiring it.

That's different from shame.

You helped me once.

I don't need you running everything anymore.

Chapter Fifteen's tyrant gets another reassignment.

Maybe identity is less like a statue and more like a city.

That feels right for me.

A city contains old buildings.

Some preserved.

Some demolished.

Some repurposed.

New construction beside history.

Streets that made sense a hundred years ago create traffic today.

You don't bulldoze the entire city because one road is outdated.

You redesign.

And sometimes the old street tells you who you were.

I am a city of previous selves.

Some neighborhoods I visit often.

Some I avoid.

Some have changed names.

Some buildings should probably come down.

But I don't need to hate the city to renovate it.

That may be self-confrontation.

Urban planning of the soul.

Maybe too poetic.

I like it anyway.

The danger is becoming a museum.

Nothing can change because history must be preserved exactly.

People do this.

"This is just who I am."

Maybe.

Or maybe that is a preservation ordinance written by fear.

I'm stubborn.

I'm intense.

I don't trust people.

I tell it like it is.

I don't apologize.

I worry.

That's just me.

No.

Those may be patterns.

Identity language can make behavior sound biologically permanent.

Sometimes temperament is durable.

Behavior remains modifiable.

Don't turn habit into destiny because revision is uncomfortable.

"This is who I am" can be one of the most closed-minded sentences we say about ourselves.

Who decided?

When?

At seventeen?

Thirty?

Yesterday?

Maybe who I am includes the ability to become slightly different.

But endless self-reinvention has its own pathology.

I don't want to become a man with no center.

Trends arrive.

New philosophy.

New identity.

New worldview.

Always replacing.

There must be continuity.

Values.

Relationships.

Commitments.

Memory.

Character.

Open-mindedness should not make me liquid.

So what remains?

Good question.

Maybe principles can remain while methods evolve.

Dignity.

Curiosity.

Responsibility.

Love.

Honesty.

Freedom.

Those feel durable to me.

How I understand them may change.

How I practice them certainly should.

The trunk remains.

Branches move.

Maybe.

Even principles can conflict.

Honesty versus kindness.

Freedom versus safety.

Loyalty versus conscience.

Responsibility versus mercy.

No algorithm.

The open mind does not merely update facts.

It renegotiates tensions.

Again and again.

Exhausting.

Maybe that is why dogma is attractive.

Dogma saves energy.

Rule already written.

Answer available.

No internal hearing.

No ambiguity.

Just apply.

Open-mindedness is metabolically expensive.

It asks me to keep processing.

No wonder we seek tribes.

Tribes outsource thinking.

That does not mean communities are bad.

We need them.

But I want community without intellectual surrender.

Belonging without mandatory blindness.

That may be difficult because shared assumptions help communities cohere.

Permanent tension again.

Maybe loneliness is part of nuance.

Chapter Four.

When I refuse easy categories, sometimes I stand between groups.

But I need to examine whether that loneliness is always principled.

Maybe sometimes I isolate because belonging requires compromise and vulnerability.

Careful, Jose.

The outsider identity can become ego too.

I don't belong because I see more clearly.

Maybe.

Or maybe you're difficult.

Both possibilities belong in the audit.

That one makes me laugh.

Good.

Humor keeps the knife from becoming ceremonial.

I want to be careful with the metaphor of old selves dying.

Actual death is not intellectual growth.

People who have lost someone know the difference.

I mean something smaller but psychologically real:

the grief of revision.

You wake up and an old certainty no longer fits.

There is no funeral.

No condolences.

You simply walk around with less ground beneath you.

Then slowly something else forms.

Sometimes nothing forms immediately.

That is the hardest part.

Between beliefs.

Between identities.

"I don't know what I think anymore."

That can feel frightening.

But maybe that empty space is fertile.

Chapter Seven's void.

We rush to fill it because uncertainty feels like failure.

What if I remain there a little?

Not forever.

Long enough for a better answer.

This book itself lives in that space.

It does not give nineteen commandments.

It gives nineteen confessions.

A commandment closes.

A confession opens.

I did this.

I noticed this.

I may be wrong about this too.

Come look.

That is closer to what I want.

The reader does not need Jose Franco's answers.

The reader needs permission to interrogate his own.

Maybe my mistakes can function as prompts.

Not templates.

That distinction protects the project from becoming another doctrine.

I think of a boy on a stoop.

Maybe that is where this book belongs.

Not a lecture hall.

Not a podium.

A stoop.

Street noise.

People passing.

Somebody argues.

Somebody laughs.

Music from somewhere.

A kid listening to adults say contradictory things.

One says work hard and you'll succeed.

Another worked hard and didn't.

One says trust the police.

Another has a story.

One says never trust anybody.

Another stranger just helped carry groceries upstairs.

Reality refuses the clean lesson.

The boy has to think.

Maybe that is the modern mean street.

Not merely poverty or violence.

The collision of stories.

Every phone carrying ten thousand certainties.

Everybody selling an interpretation.

Everybody telling the boy what kind of man to become.

Algorithm says this.

Coach says this.

Father says this.

Friend says this.

Influencer says this.

History says something more complicated.

And somewhere underneath all the noise:

What do **you** see?

But even that question is dangerous.

Because what you see is filtered.

Language.

Fear.

Experience.

Bias.

Desire.

Chapter One.

So maybe the next question is:

What might I be missing?

That question could be the heartbeat of the entire book.

What might I be missing?

Before criticizing.

Before advising.

Before voting.

Before coaching.

Before punishing.

Before trusting.

Before distrusting.

Before declaring victory.

Before declaring humanity hopeless.

What might I be missing?

Not to paralyze action.

To introduce humility.

I want my players to learn that.

Not as philosophy class.

Baseball.

Ball gets through.

What did you see?

What did you miss?

Next time.

Hitter swings through.

What did you expect?

What happened?

Adjust.

Baseball is epistemology wearing cleats.

Maybe that's why I love it.

The game punishes certainty quickly.

You think fastball.

Curveball.

Wrong.

Adjust.

You think runner won't go.

He goes.

Adjust.

You think kid can't play.

He develops.

Adjust.

You think you're a good coach.

Season gives evidence.

Adjust.

No final answer.

Next pitch.

Life is less generous because feedback can take years.

Bad belief may produce good short-term outcome.

Good decision may produce catastrophe.

Chapter Ten.

So updating becomes harder.

We need patience.

Evidence across time.

Not every loss disproves the process.

Not every win validates it.

This is crucial.

Open-mindedness does not mean changing after every result.

That is reactivity.

I can throw strikes, play defense, trust—and lose.

Doesn't invalidate the philosophy immediately.

Need sample.

Context.

Patterns.

Similarly, I can make a terrible decision and get lucky.

Do not confuse outcome with wisdom.

The internal audit needs longitudinal evidence.

Maybe beliefs should have probation periods.

Interesting.

I think X.

Let's see.

What would I expect if X were true?

What would surprise me?

What evidence counts against it?

Popper again.

Not every belief can be tested cleanly.

Still, asking helps.

I especially need that for beliefs about people.

"I think he doesn't care."

Okay.

What evidence?

Maybe quiet affect.

Maybe late twice.

What would caring look like?

Could caring look different from my style?

Chapter Four.

Give the hypothesis competition.

Maybe he's anxious.

Maybe distracted.

Maybe doesn't care.

Observe.

Don't sentence prematurely.

This matters enormously in coaching because labels become expectations.

Expectations change behavior.

The kid senses.

Then the label can create evidence for itself.

Dangerous.

Open-mindedness toward people may be one of the most humane disciplines.

Let them surprise you.

I want people to let me surprise them too.

Which means I cannot demand that others forget my history while I imprison them in theirs.

Symmetry again.

If I want revision rights, grant them where safe.

There is one more painful part.

Sometimes changing my mind will not repair consequences of the old belief.

I can realize later.

Too late.

A relationship damaged.

Opportunity missed.

Words said.

Child older.

Player gone.

That is grief.

Self-confrontation cannot become time travel.

What do I do with that?

Apologize where appropriate.

Repair what can be repaired.

Change future behavior.

Carry the lesson.

Do not turn regret into theater.

There is no cosmic refund.

Chapter Seven.

The universe does not reimburse awareness.

That is why earlier self-confrontation matters.

Latency.

Catch it sooner.

But I will always discover some things late.

That is the human condition.

Maybe the goal is not eliminating late realizations.

It's shortening the delay where possible.

From thirty years to ten.

Ten to one.

One year to one conversation.

One conversation to one breath.

That is getting better.

I love that.

Growth measured partly in latency.

How long between mistake and awareness?

Between awareness and admission?

Between admission and change?

Between change and relapse?

Between relapse and return?

Maybe that's a more honest metric than perfection.

When I was younger, I could defend a position for days.

Maybe now hours.

Eventually minutes?

Progress.

Not sainthood.

Latency.

This is also how emotional maturity may work.

Anger comes.

Old Jose speaks immediately.

Better Jose notices after.

Better still notices during.

Better still pauses before.

The anger never needed elimination.

The space around it expanded.

That is power.

Not domination.

Chapter Fourteen finally finds its healthier will.

The will to power over myself is not forcing myself never to be wrong.

It is developing enough internal freedom to survive discovering that I am.

That might be one of the strongest sentences in this book.

The will to power over myself is not forcing myself never to be wrong. It is developing enough internal freedom to survive discovering that I am.

Because if I can survive being wrong, I no longer need to defend every belief to the death.

Then curiosity becomes safer.

Apology safer.

Revision safer.

Other people safer.

Me safer.

Maybe ego does not need to disappear.

It needs to learn mortality.

Ideas die.

Identities evolve.

Status changes.

Bodies age.

Children grow.

Players leave.

Businesses close.

Books disappear.

Eventually I disappear.

Chapter Nine.

Once insignificance is accepted, being wrong becomes less catastrophic.

The universe will continue.

Good.

Change your mind.

There is humor in imagining the cosmos waiting for Jose Franco to resolve his opinion before proceeding.

Stars suspended.

Planets holding.

Everyone quiet.

Jose is reconsidering.

Give him a minute.

Ridiculous.

Useful.

So change.

Not frivolously.

Not because pressure demands.

Not because the crowd moved.

Change when evidence, experience, or deeper reflection earns the change.

And when it does, don't apologize for learning.

Apologize for harm if needed.

Not for growth.

I want my daughter to see that.

Not a father who always knew.

A father capable of saying:

I thought that before.

I think differently now.

Here is why.

Maybe that models more than certainty ever could.

I want players to see it.

Coach changed practice.

Why?

Because I think the old method wasn't working as well as I thought.

No drama.

Adults can update.

Good lesson.

I want readers to see it too.

If something in Chapter Eighteen contradicts something I wrote ten years ago, maybe that's evidence of inconsistency.

Maybe evidence of growth.

Read both.

Decide.

I am not interested in preserving a museum of Jose's correctness.

I want a workshop.

Tools everywhere.

Some broken.

Some useful.

Saw dust on the floor.

Work still happening.

That image may be better than the city.

Maybe both.

The self is a city with a workshop on the stoop.

There.

Too much.

Keep moving.

Confession Number Eighteen:

I like being open-minded most when openness costs me nothing.

I like challenging beliefs that belong to other people.

I can use nuance as an identity.

I can use uncertainty to avoid commitment.

I can use experience as rank.

I can use language to explain away being wrong.

I can call myself an autodidact and forget that choosing my own curriculum can preserve my blind spots.

I can mistake skepticism for independence and contrarianism for thought.

And I know that when a belief becomes part of who I think I am, changing it can feel less like learning and more like dying.

That is why staying open hurts.

But the alternative hurts more eventually.

A closed mind has to spend increasing energy protecting an aging map from changing terrain.

Evidence arrives.

Build wall.

Contradiction arrives.

Discredit source.

Friend questions.

Question friend.

Child disagrees.

Call child naïve.

Young coach brings data.

Call him inexperienced.

World changes.

Complain about world.

Eventually the map is pristine.

And useless.

I do not want that.

I would rather let the map get messy.

Cross things out.

Write notes.

This road closed.

New bridge here.

Danger.

Beautiful view.

I was wrong about this neighborhood.

Ask someone who lives here.

Maybe that's wisdom.

Not possessing the perfect map.

Knowing the map remains a map.

Chapter One.

Cracked mirror.

Always.

Tomorrow some belief I currently hold may become embarrassing.

Good.

That means tomorrow's Jose learned something.

I hope.

Maybe tomorrow's Jose is the idiot.

Also possible.

So leave him notes.

Evidence.

Questions.

Humility.

And don't give him unlimited authority either.

Every morning I wake up carrying yesterday's self.

I do not need to murder him.

I need to interview him.

What worked?

What didn't?

What are you protecting?

What are you afraid of?

What did you miss?

What should we keep?

What can die?

Then go live.

Some parts will die reluctantly.

Pride.

Certainty.

Old resentments.

Need for recognition.

The fantasy of control.

Some will return the next morning.

Apparently death is temporary in this metaphor.

Fine.

Human beings are repetitive.

Kill the illusion again.

Maybe "die daily" really means:

Release daily.

Release the requirement that today's evidence preserve yesterday's identity.

That feels less dramatic.

Maybe more accurate.

But I will keep the original title.

Sometimes language gets to be dramatic.

Chapter One can complain.

I do not want to become someone with no convictions.

I want convictions strong enough to guide action and loose enough to encounter reality.

Roots.

Not chains.

That is the balance.

And when someone challenges me tomorrow, I hope I remember this chapter before Chapter Two's lawyer gets to the microphone.

Maybe I won't.

Maybe I will interrupt.

Explain.

Defend.

Then an hour later:

Damn.

There it is.

Latency.

Notice.

Return.

Next pitch.

The goal is not to become a man who is never wrong.

Impossible.

Not a man who changes constantly.

Useless.

Not a man with no ego.

Fantasy.

Not a man who sees every perspective equally.

Sometimes perspectives are wrong.

The goal is smaller and harder:

To remain corrigible.

Able to be corrected.

By evidence.

By experience.

By another person.

By my daughter.

By a twelve-year-old baseball player.

By history.

By consequences.

By silence.

By myself.

Corrigibility may be one of the purest forms of freedom.

Because the man who cannot change his mind is not standing firm.

He may simply be imprisoned by the person he used to be.

I have built enough prisons for myself.

I don't need another.

So let the old Jose die where he needs to.

Thank him.

Forgive him.

Correct him.

Laugh at him occasionally.

Keep what remains useful.

Then make room.

Not for a final version.

There isn't one.

For the next version.

The one who will also be wrong.

The one who will also need correction.

The one who will someday look back at this book and see sentences he wishes he had written differently.

Good.

I hope he does.

Because if I read **How To Get Better** ten years from now and agree with every word exactly as I wrote it, I will have to ask myself a very uncomfortable question:

Did I spend those ten years getting better—or merely getting older?

NINETEEN: THE FINAL VICTORY IS NOT SOLVING THE HUMAN CONDITION, BUT LOVING IT ANYWAY

Confession #19: After All This Self-Confrontation, I Still Have No Solution to Being Human

Here is the disappointing ending.

I have not figured it out.

Nineteen confessions.

Thousands of words.

Decades of baseball.

Marriage.

Fatherhood.

Business.

Books.

Mistakes.

Arguments.

Apologies.

Fear.

Money.

Death.

Age.

Philosophy.

The Bronx.

Brooklyn.

Quiet unseen moments.

And after all of that, I cannot give you the solution to the human condition.

I cannot even give it to myself.

Good.

Maybe that is the last confession I needed.

Because somewhere beneath my curiosity has always lived the hope that if I investigated deeply enough, read enough, experienced enough, and confronted enough of my own bullshit, eventually something might resolve.

Not everything.

But me.

Maybe I could finally understand the machinery.

Fear goes here.

Ego there.

Control comes from this.

Love means that.

Discipline balanced by empathy.

Certainty restrained by curiosity.

The whole interior system mapped.

Then perhaps I could operate Jose Franco correctly.

I no longer believe that.

I am not a machine awaiting proper calibration.

I am a human being.

That is considerably messier.

There is something funny about calling this book *How To Get Better.*

Better implies direction.

Movement.

Progress.

It does not tell me where the finish line is.

Maybe there isn't one.

I think I knew that when I chose the title.

I am only beginning to understand what it means.

There is no morning when I wake up and announce:

Done.

Ego resolved.

Fear integrated.

Control appropriately calibrated.

All contradictions reconciled.

Jose Franco, final edition.

No updates required.

That man would frighten me.

Mostly because he would almost certainly start telling everyone else how to live.

Chapter Fourteen would have to drag him outside.

Maybe completion itself was another form of control.

If I could solve myself, I could stop being surprised by myself.

No more contradiction.

No more shame.

No more moments when someone I love points out something I failed to see.

No more discovering that the behavior I criticized last week belongs to me this week.

No more becoming afraid when I thought I was courageous.

No more ego appearing inside humility.

No more selfishness hiding inside generosity.

No more uncertainty.

Wonderful.

Dead.

A completed human being sounds suspiciously like one who has stopped living.

Living things adjust.

Respond.

Break.

Heal.

Learn.

Forget.

Repeat.

A tree does not finish becoming a tree while alive.

Maybe I do not finish becoming myself either.

That sentence is easier to accept at this age than it would have been when I was twenty.

At twenty I wanted arrival.

At this age, movement may be enough.

That doesn't mean every direction is equally good.

I still believe in better.

That belief survived all nineteen confessions.

Kinder.

More responsible.

More honest.

Less controlling.

More courageous.

Less attached to certainty.

More disciplined without becoming cruel.

More capable of listening.

More willing to revise.

More aware of my insignificance.

More present.

Those directions matter to me.

But I no longer expect them to produce perfection.

They are bearings.

Not destinations.

Maybe character is navigation.

Not arrival.

You notice you're drifting.

Correct.

Wind changes.

Correct.

Current changes.

Correct.

You made a bad decision.

Correct.

You were arrogant.

Correct.

You became afraid.

Correct.

You hurt somebody.

Repair where possible.

Correct.

No final harbor where all future navigation becomes unnecessary.

That sounds less heroic.

More believable.

Baseball has been trying to teach me this my entire life.

A player can have a great game today.

Tomorrow begins 0-for-0.

There is no lifetime achievement exemption at home plate.

The pitcher does not care what you did yesterday.

The baseball definitely doesn't.

You prepare again.

Compete again.

Adjust again.

Fail again.

Sometimes succeed.

Then do it again.

Maybe human character works like that.

Yesterday's patience does not guarantee today's.

Yesterday's humility earns no lifetime credential.

I listened beautifully Monday.

Wonderful.

Can I listen Tuesday?

That's the game.

I used to tell players:

You are your own best coach.

I still believe that.

But perhaps I understand the sentence differently now.

Your own best coach is not the voice constantly criticizing you.

Not the internal drill sergeant.

Not the voice demanding perfection.

A good coach observes.

Corrects.

Encourages.

Holds standards.

Changes methods.

Forgives mistakes without pretending they didn't happen.

Then gives you another repetition.

Maybe self-confrontation should sound more like that.

Not:

Jose, how could you still be doing this?

But:

There it is again.

What happened?

What did you miss?

What can you do differently on the next pitch?

That feels more sustainable.

For years, I have thought the quiet unseen moments determine the player.

I think they also determine the person.

Not the moments when we describe our values.

The moments when no one is listening.

Do I rehearse resentment?

Do I indulge contempt?

Do I spend money because I want something or because I want someone to see it?

Do I mentally prosecute someone for hours?

Do I call the person I love?

Do I apologize?

Do I keep a promise nobody could enforce?

Do I let somebody else's success diminish mine?

Do I stop myself from sending the sentence that would feel good for thirty seconds and cost the relationship much longer?

That's the laboratory.

No audience.

No book.

No chapter.

Just me.

Which makes this book dangerous in an unexpected way.

I could finish writing it and feel accomplished.

Look at that.

Nineteen confessions.

Self-confrontation.

Vulnerability.

Thoughtfulness.

Maybe someone tells me it's profound.

My ego will appreciate that.

Then later that afternoon somebody interrupts my plan and I become impatient.

There is the exam.

The book does not count.

Writing about love does not count as loving.

Writing about humility does not count as being humble.

Writing about control does not mean I stopped controlling.

The words point.

Life verifies.

Chapter One had it right from the beginning.

The mirror is cracked.

Maybe the final confession is that I could turn this entire book into another hiding place.

A sophisticated way of saying:

Look how self-aware I am.

I need to guard against that.

Public confession does not automatically produce private change.

A person can tell the truth about himself and remain exactly the same.

Awareness is not transformation.

We've been here before.

So what makes the book matter?

Maybe nothing.

Unless something follows.

There is that question again.

The question that has followed every chapter like a kid carrying the equipment bag.

Now what?

Language is inadequate.

Now what?

My explanations become excuses.

Now what?

I use complexity to hide.

Now what?

Nuance isolates.

Now what?

Certainty remains impossible.

Now what?

Fear arrives.

Now what?

I am insignificant.

Now what?

The world is unjust.

Now what?

I project.

I argue.

I criticize.

I control.

I contain the ingredients of tyranny.

I can become disciplined enough to become cruel.

Human beings can commit atrocities.

My mind will resist evidence that threatens identity.

Now what?

Maybe that is where love enters.

Not as the answer.

I distrust answers that large.

As the response.

There is a difference.

Love does not solve language.

It sometimes makes me try harder to understand.

Love does not eliminate ego.

It sometimes gives me a reason to put ego down for five minutes.

Love does not abolish fear.

It sometimes makes me walk through fear because someone matters on the other side.

Love does not guarantee justice.

It may give me a reason to behave justly when injustice would benefit me.

Love does not prevent catastrophe.

It gives me someone to sit beside when catastrophe arrives.

Love does not eliminate disagreement.

It may remind me that defeating you is not always the same thing as reaching you.

Love does not eliminate boundaries.

Sometimes love requires them.

Love does not solve death.

Nothing I know solves death.

But love makes mortality expensive.

And maybe meaningful.

That is why I hesitate with the phrase:

Love conquers all.

It doesn't.

Cancer can conquer a body filled with love.

War can separate people who love each other.

A drunk driver does not stop because someone loves the person in the other car.

Abuse can destroy a relationship where love once existed.

The universe remains indifferent.

Chapter Seven is not repealed because we reached the final chapter.

Love is not Kevlar either.

I do not want sentimental love.

I want something tougher.

Love that sees.

Love that can say no.

Love that can leave.

Love that can forgive without necessarily reconciling.

Love that can hold someone accountable.

Love that can tolerate another person's autonomy.

Love that doesn't require the other person to become an extension of me.

Love that does not need innocence in order to see humanity.

Maybe that is the kind I mean.

Perhaps an open heart is not a heart without scar tissue.

Chapter Seventeen.

Maybe it is scar tissue that still stretches.

I like that.

Because I have no interest in returning to innocence.

I know too much for that.

History exists.

Death exists.

Cruelty exists.

Betrayal.

Greed.

Power.

Self-deception.

I know what humans can do.

I know enough about myself to understand that the species' contradictions are not only found in strangers.

And still:

I do not want to close.

That is the choice.

Cynicism offered the easier ending.

Humans are hopeless.

Protect yourself.

Expect selfishness.

Trust nobody completely.

Do not become vulnerable enough to be surprised.

There is intelligence in some of that.

Boundaries matter.

Skepticism matters.

But cynicism asks for too much rent.

It wants wonder.

Trust.

Curiosity.

Hope.

Eventually affection itself.

Too expensive.

At the opposite extreme is naïveté.

Everyone is fundamentally good.

Love everybody.

Trust the process.

Everything happens for a reason.

No.

I cannot live there either.

Too much evidence has accumulated.

So I need another place.

Open eyes.

Open heart.

That may be the simplest version.

Open eyes. Open heart.

See clearly enough not to become naïve.

Remain open enough not to become cynical.

No permanent balance.

Just adjustment.

Maybe love without critical thinking becomes gullibility.

Critical thinking without love becomes sterile.

I want both.

That seems to be where every chapter has been heading.

The book started by doubting words.

It ends by asking what should animate them.

I think about my wife.

Marriage is an excellent destroyer of philosophical abstractions.

You can write beautifully about love.

Then live with another human being for decades.

Different thing.

They repeat stories.

So do you.

They have habits.

So do you.

You miscommunicate.

Become irritated.

Worry.

Age.

Change.

Carry histories into the kitchen.

Real love has laundry.

Bills.

Schedules.

Misunderstandings.

Physical bodies.

Fear.

Sex.

Grief.

Family.

Annoyance.

Compromise.

Forgiveness.

That's better than abstraction.

Messier.

More credible.

To love someone over time means loving multiple versions of them.

And allowing them to love—or tolerate—multiple versions of you.

Some versions easier than others.

That is remarkable.

You wake up beside a person who has seen evidence against your public relations campaign.

They know.

And they're still there.

There is humility in that.

The stranger may believe my polished explanation.

My wife has exhibits.

Good.

Everybody needs someone immune to the press release.

I think fatherhood taught me another form of love.

Love that has to relinquish ownership.

A child begins inside dependence.

Then every successful developmental step takes her farther away from your control.

Walk.

School.

Friends.

Drive.

College.

Career.

Home.

Life.

You celebrate and grieve simultaneously.

I understand that now more than I did when she was small.

Maybe parental love ultimately asks:

Can you love someone enough to let her life stop being about you?

That is brutal.

Beautiful.

I know the answer intellectually.

Yes.

Behavior will tell me whether I've learned it.

A father wants to protect.

Fine.

But one day protection means trusting what you helped build.

And accepting that she may choose differently.

Chapter Fourteen.

Care fiercely.

Hold lightly.

Maybe love is that sentence embodied.

Coaching has its version.

A player arrives.

You teach.

Correct.

Push.

Encourage.

Then the season ends.

He leaves.

Maybe another coach teaches something completely different.

Maybe better.

Can I be okay with that?

I want to.

Because the kid does not owe me permanence.

If something I taught serves him, good.

If he discards it, also potentially good.

My coaching belongs to the moment until he decides what to carry.

Maybe selfless teaching means accepting that the student eventually edits the teacher.

I like that.

Writing too.

Once you read these words, they are no longer entirely mine.

You bring your history.

Your pain.

Your politics.

Your family.

You may read a sentence and see something I never intended.

Chapter One.

I cannot control that.

Maybe the loving posture toward a reader is:

Here is what I saw in myself.

Do with it what you will.

I hope it helps.

But you don't owe me agreement.

That is why this book should never become nineteen instructions.

Confessions.

Keep that word.

A confession says:

I am the defendant.

Not you.

If you recognize yourself somewhere, welcome.

If not, keep moving.

Maybe another confession catches you.

Maybe none.

That's okay.

I wrote this book first to myself.

That matters.

If everyone else disappears, the conversation remains.

Jose talking to Jose.

Not because I am endlessly fascinating.

Chapter Nine handled that.

Because I have access to one consciousness from inside.

Mine.

That is the laboratory I have standing to inspect most aggressively.

I can speculate about humanity.

Read psychology.

History.

Philosophy.

Watch people.

But I know one hypocrite intimately.

One fearful man.

One controlling man.

One loving man.

One generous man.

One selfish man.

One disciplined man.

One lazy man.

One confident man.

One insecure man.

All named Jose.

That should keep me busy.

Maybe if everyone were slightly more occupied with that particular investigation, public life would improve.

Maybe.

Careful.

There I go telling everyone else what to do.

Stay in your lane, Jose.

There is humor in realizing even a book about not controlling people can become controlling in the last chapter.

Human nature does not take vacations.

Good.

Laugh.

Continue.

What does loving myself mean inside all this?

I have been hesitant with self-love.

The phrase can become vague.

Sometimes narcissistic.

Sometimes commercially packaged.

Buy the candle.

Take the bath.

Love yourself.

Fine.

But the form of self-love that interests me is harsher and kinder.

Do not lie to yourself.

Do not humiliate yourself either.

Hold standards.

Permit imperfection.

Repair.

Rest.

Try again.

Don't let one mistake become identity.

Don't let one success become entitlement.

Care enough about yourself to confront what harms other people.

Care enough about yourself not to require other people to repair every insecurity.

That feels like love.

Self-confrontation without love becomes self-hatred.

Self-love without confrontation becomes self-deception.

Both.

Of course.

This book was always going to end with another contradiction.

Maybe that is why I call the final victory loving the human condition.

Not approving it.

Not excusing it.

Not solving it.

Loving does not mean:

Everything is fine.

Humanity is not fine.

Neither am I.

Love says:

I see enough of the whole to remain involved.

That is different.

A parent loves a difficult child without believing every behavior is acceptable.

A spouse can love while angry.

A citizen can love a country while criticizing it.

A coach can love a game while identifying what adults have distorted in it.

I can love humanity without being impressed by everything humans do.

Maybe mature love contains disappointment.

Perhaps it has to.

The word "anyway" in the confession matters.

Loving it anyway.

Anyway means evidence exists against the decision.

Humans will betray.

Love anyway.

Not the betrayer necessarily.

Life.

People.

Possibility.

You will fail yourself.

Keep participating anyway.

The universe does not guarantee meaning.

Create some anyway.

You will die.

Live anyway.

That is not optimism.

It's defiance.

Quiet defiance.

Against nihilism.

Against cynicism.

Against the instinct to withdraw because nothing can be guaranteed.

Camus might walk somewhere nearby in that thought.

But I do not need him to finish it for me.

Chapter Three.

Simple truth:

I'm here.

For now.

There are people I love.

There is work I care about.

There are mistakes to correct.

There is baseball.

There is breakfast.

That's enough material for existence.

I don't need the universe to certify meaning.

Chapter Seven.

I can love something the universe doesn't care about.

That's what humans do.

Maybe that's part of what makes us human.

A kid hits his first home run.

Cosmically irrelevant.

Try telling his father.

A woman holds the hand of the man she has loved for fifty years.

Cosmically irrelevant.

Try telling them.

A mother repeats a story her son has heard a hundred times.

No effect on history.

Still something.

Meaning changes with distance.

Zoom in.

Chapter Nine.

Maybe love is the willingness to zoom in.

To say:

This person.

This moment.

This ordinary thing.

Enough.

Not because I forgot the cosmos.

Because I remembered it and came back.

I have spent much of this book zooming out.

Human nature.

History.

Politics.

Language.

Power.

Death.

Insignificance.

Maybe the final chapter should zoom in.

My mother.

My wife.

My daughter.

A baseball field.

A boy making an error.

Me catching myself interrupting.

The next apology.

The next meal.

The next morning.

That is where the philosophy either lives or dies.

No one needs another man proclaiming universal love while being unbearable to the person sitting beside him.

I especially do not.

So love has to become specific.

Patience with this person.

Attention to this sentence.

Forgiveness for this mistake.

Boundary here.

Apology now.

Phone down.

Listen.

Those are less impressive than humanity.

Good.

I have thought about what I want players to remember.

Throw strikes.

Play defense.

Trust.

Aggressive mistakes over passive mistakes.

Quiet unseen moments.

You are your own best coach.

Present.

Patient.

Prepared.

I hope some of that stays.

But perhaps the deeper message is:

You are more than what happened today.

That matters.

Because sports can teach children to confuse performance and worth very early.

Adults do it too.

You struck out.

You are not the strikeout.

You made an error.

You are not the error.

You failed.

You are not failure.

You behaved badly.

Do not hide from it.

But don't become it either.

Repair.

Next pitch.

That may be self-love and discipline finally shaking hands.

Maybe I need the same message.

I have been controlling.

I am not control.

I have been arrogant.

I am not arrogance.

I have been afraid.

I am not fear.

I have been generous.

I am not permanently generous either.

No adjective owns me entirely.

Behavior remains.

Choice remains.

Next pitch.

This is why I resist final judgments on people when possible.

Not because behavior doesn't matter.

Because a living person remains capable of another action.

Sometimes not with me.

Boundaries may close the relationship.

But as long as life remains, possibility remains somewhere.

That does not guarantee redemption.

It leaves the door conceptually unlocked.

I prefer that.

Death closes certain doors.

That is why regret matters.

There will be conversations I do not get back.

People gone.

Things unsaid.

Apologies impossible.

Every older person carries some of that.

Maybe love asks us not to manufacture unnecessary future ghosts.

Call.

Say it.

Not every time.

Sometimes distance is wise.

But do not postpone tenderness purely because ego wants better conditions.

Mortality has poor scheduling etiquette.

I think of my father.

Things I understood after he died cannot be delivered backward.

That's painful.

Maybe those understandings can change how I behave forward.

That is the only direction life allows.

No cosmic refund.

Use the information.

My mother.

Age makes arithmetic visible.

I don't like arithmetic applied to people.

Still.

Finite.

Maybe love responds by paying attention, not by pretending the number isn't finite.

Listen to the story again.

Maybe that's getting better too.

My daughter.

I want her to remember less of what I told her than how free she felt to become herself around me.

That may be a better measure.

Not whether she follows my advice.

Whether she can tell me she isn't going to.

And still know the relationship is intact.

That is the father I want to be.

Again:

Aspiration.

Behavior will verify.

My wife.

After decades, maybe love is less about novelty and more about attention despite familiarity.

The extraordinary becomes ordinary through repetition.

That is dangerous.

The person who matters most becomes background because they're always there.

Until they aren't.

Chapter Seven.

I don't want catastrophe to be the event that restores focus.

Pay attention now.

There is no philosophical sophistication required.

Look.

Listen.

Touch.

Ask.

Thank.

Simple truths.

Chapter Three has been waiting seventeen chapters for us to shut up.

And baseball.

Of course baseball.

There is still something about a baseball field that reduces philosophy to action.

Throw.

Catch.

Run.

Hit.

Fail.

Again.

A child does not need my entire worldview when the ball is coming.

He needs his feet moving.

Maybe life is similar.

At some point thought has done enough.

Move your feet.

I love thought.

That will not change.

Questioning is part of me.

Autodidact.

Read.

Investigate.

Challenge.

But thinking must eventually return me to living.

Otherwise I become the critic standing outside creation.

Chapter Thirteen.

This book must return me to the field.

So what does *How To Get Better* ask of me after the last page?

Nothing dramatic.

Maybe tomorrow:

Listen ten seconds longer.

Catch an excuse.

Ask one more question before judging.

Let somebody else finish.

Notice fear.

Avoid one unnecessary attempt at control.

Apologize cleanly.

Accept a correction.

Rest if rest is what discipline requires.

Call someone I love.

Then fail at several of those.

Notice.

Try again.

That is enough.

I no longer believe the will to power means becoming invulnerable.

Maybe it means becoming less frightened by my own vulnerability.

I don't need to dominate uncertainty.

I need enough strength to live inside it.

I don't need to conquer ego permanently.

I need to notice when it grabs the wheel.

I don't need to eliminate fear.

I need to decide when it deserves a vote.

I don't need to solve myself.

I need to remain reachable.

Reachable by truth.

By evidence.

By another person.

By love.

That feels like power.

And maybe love itself requires surrendering power.

I cannot make someone love me.

Cannot make my daughter need me.

Cannot make players remember.

Cannot make readers understand.

Cannot make the dead return.

Cannot make tomorrow arrive according to schedule.

Love exists without sovereignty.

That's what makes it frightening.

Control says:

Stay.

Love sometimes says:

Go.

Control says:

Agree.

Love says:

Think.

Control says:

Need me.

Love says:

Become capable.

Control says:

Don't change.

Love says:

I will try to know who you are becoming.

That is harder.

Maybe all nineteen chapters collapse into one conflict:

Can I care deeply without trying to own the outcome?

That might be it.

Baseball.

Family.

Money.

Politics.

Writing.

My own character.

Care deeply.

Hold lightly.

Care deeply enough to prepare.

Hold lightly enough to accept what preparation cannot control.

Care deeply enough to speak.

Hold lightly enough to listen.

Care deeply enough to have convictions.

Hold lightly enough to revise them.

Care deeply enough to love people.

Hold lightly enough to let them be other than what I wanted.

That is where I want to live.

I will not always.

There will be days when I squeeze.

Days I become certain.

Days I control.

Days I judge too quickly.

Days I argue to win.

Days I hide behind sophisticated explanations.

Days when I am cynical.

Days when fear shrinks me.

Days when discipline outruns empathy.

There will be days I forget this entire book while technically remaining its author.

That is perhaps the most predictable outcome of all.

The question is what happens when I notice.

Shame?

Or return?

I choose return.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Maybe forgiveness is simply allowing another repetition without pretending the previous one didn't happen.

For myself.

Sometimes for others.

You made the error.

Score it.

Learn.

Another ground ball is coming.

Be ready.

There is something beautiful about that.

Baseball never asks whether you deserve another ball.

The ball simply comes.

Life does too, until it doesn't.

Maybe grace is hidden in repetition.

Another morning.

Another conversation.

Another chance to respond differently.

Not guaranteed.

Available today.

Use it.

I have called this chapter the final victory.

Maybe that's too triumphant.

There is no victory.

Not really.

Maybe the victory is refusing the need for one.

I don't defeat the human condition.

I participate.

I don't defeat mortality.

I notice life.

I don't defeat contradiction.

I carry it.

I don't defeat fear.

I walk with it.

I don't defeat ego.

I laugh when I catch it.

I don't defeat suffering.

Sometimes I sit beside it.

I don't defeat uncertainty.

I choose anyway.

Maybe love is participation without conquest.

That sentence feels right.

The world will remain ruined in places.

People will continue doing terrible things.

I may continue doing smaller things I regret.

Humanity will disappoint.

So will I.

None of that requires indifference.

That is the final refusal.

I refuse to become indifferent because caring hurts.

I refuse to turn skepticism into contempt.

I refuse to require purity from people before seeing their humanity.

I refuse to make my own imperfection an excuse for avoiding responsibility.

I refuse to confuse forgiveness with forgetting.

I refuse to demand certainty before loving.

And I refuse to make love another excuse for refusing boundaries.

Everything stays difficult.

Good.

At least it's honest.

I began this book with a cracked mirror.

Maybe I should finish there.

The mirror is still cracked.

Nineteen chapters didn't fix it.

I look.

Fragments.

Coach.

Father.

Husband.

Son.

Writer.

Autodidact.

Bronx.

Brooklyn.

Baseball.

Ego.

Fear.

Love.

Some pieces flatter me.

Some don't.

I no longer need the reflection to become whole before I live.

Maybe the cracks let light through.

That metaphor is probably too convenient.

Fine.

I'm allowed one at the end.

The boy looks into the mirror.

The older man stands behind him now.

Not physically.

Memory.

Neither understands the other completely.

The boy thinks the man knows.

The man smiles.

If only.

What would I tell him?

Not:

Don't be afraid.

He will be.

Not:

Everything works out.

It doesn't.

Not:

Work hard and you'll succeed.

Sometimes.

Not:

Trust everybody.

Absolutely not.

Not:

Never trust anyone.

Worse.

Maybe I would tell him:

Pay attention.

Pay attention when you're scared.

Pay attention when you desperately need to be right.

Pay attention when somebody else's success irritates you.

Pay attention when you start calling control love.

Pay attention when the crowd feels too good.

Pay attention when cynicism starts sounding intelligent.

Pay attention to people who disagree without trying to destroy you.

Pay attention to the ordinary days.

They disappear faster than you think.

And when you screw up—

because you will—

don't waste the entire future defending the past.

Correct.

Then maybe I would tell him one more thing.

Something he might not understand yet.

Something I am only beginning to.

You are not nearly as important as you think you are.

He might look hurt.

So I would add:

And that is going to set you free.

Free to fail.

Free to change.

Free to laugh at yourself.

Free to let people disagree.

Free to let your daughter become herself.

Free to coach without needing ownership.

Free to write something nobody reads.

Free to love without demanding permanence.

Free to become one tiny human being among billions.

Here.

For a little while.

And maybe the boy asks:

"So what's the point?"

Fair question.

I spent nineteen chapters asking versions of it.

I would like to give him something profound.

Maybe that's the old ego.

So I won't.

I might just shrug.

Look out toward the street.

Toward whatever game is being played.

And say:

I don't know.

Then:

Go find out.

That may be the final lesson.

Not that meaning is waiting somewhere to be discovered.

Maybe sometimes it is.

Maybe meaning also gets made.

In relationships.

Work.

Responsibility.

Creation.

Presence.

Love.

One human being deciding another human being matters even though the stars do not care.

That's enough mystery for me.

If you have read this far, I should probably resist telling you what to do next.

That would violate several chapters at once.

I do not know your life.

Your fear.

Your grief.

Your blind spots.

Your circumstances.

Your history.

Maybe none of my confessions belong to you.

Maybe all of them do in different proportions.

That's yours.

Not mine.

I wrote these words first because I needed to hear them.

Maybe I will need to read them again.

Probably.

Maybe five years from now I'll disagree with parts.

I hope so.

Chapter Eighteen.

Maybe something here helps you identify a sentence you've been avoiding.

If it does, good.

No credit necessary.

The thought becomes yours.

There is only one person whose response I can reasonably require.

Me.

So, Jose:

The book is almost over.

Nothing is solved.

You still interrupt.

Still worry.

Still occasionally want control.

Still like recognition.

Still feel fear.

Still have opinions.

Still contradict yourself.

Still capable of being an asshole.

Excellent.

Now you know what the work looks like.

Tomorrow morning nobody will hand you a certificate for completing nineteen confessions.

Your wife may ask you something while you are distracted.

Your daughter may make a decision without consulting you.

Someone may irritate you.

A driver may cut you off.

A bill may arrive.

A player may ignore something you have explained six times.

You may read something politically ridiculous.

Your body may hurt.

You may become afraid about money, health, aging, irrelevance, death, or something you haven't imagined yet.

There.

Chapter Twenty.

Except there is no Chapter Twenty.

There is Tuesday.

That's where the book continues.

Not on paper.

Behavior.

So close it.

Go live.

Pay attention.

And every once in a while, when certainty becomes too comfortable, ask the question that survived every confession:

What am I not seeing?

Then listen.

Maybe nothing arrives.

Maybe an uncomfortable answer does.

Either way, remain reachable.

Remain corrigible.

Remain human.

And somehow—

knowing everything you now know about what human beings are capable of,

knowing what you are capable of,

knowing none of this lasts—

keep your heart open anyway.

Not because humanity has earned an acquittal.

Not because love guarantees anything.

Not because the world is just.

Not because you're certain.

Because you are here.

Because they are here.

Because for this brief, spectacularly insignificant moment, there is still another pitch coming.

Get back in the box.

AFTERWORD

Now What?

So now what?

That question has been bothering me since somewhere around the first confession.

Maybe before I wrote the first word.

Because writing about self-confrontation creates a peculiar danger.

I can mistake describing the work for doing the work.

I can write about fear without walking toward anything that frightens me.

I can write about ego while secretly hoping somebody calls the writing brilliant.

I can write about listening while interrupting my wife.

I can write about relinquishing control and then give my daughter advice she didn't ask for.

I can write about empathy and lose patience with a twelve-year-old because he failed to understand something I thought I explained perfectly.

I can write about insignificance while checking whether anybody noticed what I wrote about insignificance.

Human beings are funny.

I am especially funny when I forget that I am one of them.

So maybe the first thing to do after finishing a book called *How To Get Better* is to refuse to congratulate myself for finishing a book called *How To Get Better.*

The book isn't the work.

Tomorrow is.

I don't need nineteen new rules.

That would defeat the purpose.

I don't need a morning checklist:

Did I confront my ego?

Did I embrace insignificance?

Did I practice nuance?

Did I love the human condition?

Jesus Christ.

By breakfast I would become unbearable.

No.

Maybe the application is much smaller.

Notice sooner.

That's it.

Notice sooner.

Notice the explanation becoming an excuse.

Notice when complexity is helping me hide from something simple.

Notice when I am calling my preferred tribe "reasonable" and the other one "ideological."

Notice when nuance becomes an excuse for refusing to make a judgment.

Notice when certainty feels unusually pleasurable.

Notice when fear begins making decisions without identifying itself.

Notice when I am trying to control another person because I cannot control an outcome.

Notice when discipline begins losing empathy.

Notice when criticism becomes safer than creation.

Notice when somebody else's flaw irritates me suspiciously much.

Notice when I am arguing beyond the point where anything useful can happen.

Notice when cynicism starts making me feel intelligent.

Notice when I stop being reachable.

Notice.

Sooner.

Maybe getting better can be measured partly by **latency**.

I introduced that idea in Chapter Eighteen, and I keep returning to it.

How long does it take me to recognize myself?

I make a mistake.

Three years later I understand it.

Then maybe one year.

Then a month.

Then tomorrow morning.

Then an hour later.

Then while I'm doing it.

And occasionally—

before.

That might be growth.

Not the disappearance of the impulse.

A reduction in the distance between the impulse and awareness.

Maybe I will always want to explain myself.

Fine.

Can I catch the explanation sooner?

Maybe I will always feel the urge to control outcomes involving people I love.

Fine.

Can I recognize anxiety before disguising it as advice?

Maybe I will always feel defensive when somebody exposes a blind spot.

Fine.

Can I hear the criticism before hiring Chapter Two's defense attorney?

Maybe I will always judge.

Fine.

Can curiosity arrive five seconds earlier?

Five seconds doesn't sound like much.

Five seconds can change a conversation.

That seems more useful to me than transformation.

I distrust the word transformation sometimes.

It sounds complete.

Before.

After.

Old Jose.

New Jose.

I have never experienced myself that cleanly.

Old Jose keeps showing up.

Sometimes without knocking.

The goal is not to evict him.

Some parts of him built everything I love.

Intensity.

Drive.

Independence.

Competitiveness.

Curiosity.

Protection.

Survival.

But traits do not arrive with instructions telling us when they have exceeded their usefulness.

Intensity can become control.

Independence can become isolation.

Skepticism can become cynicism.

Confidence can become arrogance.

Discipline can become cruelty.

Love can become possession.

The same tool can build or damage depending on pressure, context, and the hand holding it.

So:

Notice.

Maybe that is the practice.

Not self-improvement.

Self-observation followed by choice.

I don't need to hate the first impulse.

I need enough space to decide whether it gets the next action.

That space is where freedom lives.

Small space.

Sometimes one breath.

Someone says something that irritates me.

There.

A moment.

The sentence I want to say is already loaded.

Maybe it's clever.

Those are the dangerous ones.

I know exactly where to place it.

I can win this little exchange.

Chapter Twelve clears its throat.

Then perhaps another question appears:

What am I trying to accomplish?

Different question.

Not:

Am I right?

Maybe I am.

What am I trying to accomplish?

Understanding?

Correction?

Punishment?

Status?

Connection?

Relief?

Do I want to solve something or make the other person feel what I am feeling?

That's worth knowing before I open my mouth.

Maybe I still say the sentence.

Self-confrontation doesn't mean passivity.

Sometimes confrontation is necessary.

Sometimes anger contains information.

Sometimes somebody needs to hear no.

Sometimes the boundary should be hard.

Sometimes the criticism is correct.

This book was never supposed to turn me into a man afraid of conviction.

The question is whether I know what is driving the conviction.

Fear can speak truth.

Ego can make a valid argument.

A person I dislike can be correct.

A person I love can be wrong.

My intentions can be good while my behavior is harmful.

I can apologize without surrendering my entire position.

I can forgive without reopening a relationship.

I can understand someone without agreeing.

I can condemn behavior without convincing myself I understand the entire person.

These distinctions are difficult.

Good.

Life apparently declined to become simpler because I wrote nineteen chapters.

So now what?

Go back to the ordinary.

That's where I want this book to end.

Not in philosophy.

The kitchen.

The car.

The baseball field.

The sidewalk.

The text message.

The phone call.

The meeting.

The argument.

The quiet room when nobody knows what I'm thinking.

Especially there.

The quiet unseen moments.

I have said that to baseball players for years.

What you do when the coach isn't looking.

When your parents aren't watching.

When nobody is keeping score.

That's where habits become identity.

Maybe I should finally accept that the same standard applies to me.

Nobody knows whether I mentally replay an insult for two hours.

Nobody knows whether I quietly resent someone else's success.

Nobody knows whether I am rehearsing an argument with someone who isn't in the room.

Nobody knows whether I am afraid.

Nobody knows whether generosity came with an invisible invoice.

Nobody knows whether the advice I am preparing to give is really for them or for me.

Except me.

Sometimes.

If I'm paying attention.

That may be why self-confrontation matters.

There are rooms nobody else can enter.

Not my wife.

Not my daughter.

Not a therapist.

Not a coach.

Not a priest.

Not a philosopher.

Not an algorithm.

Not a reader.

There is a final private room where I know—or can try to know—what I am doing.

That room needs honesty more than intelligence.

I can fool other people with language.

I can fool myself with better language.

That's the dangerous part.

So occasionally the sophisticated explanation has to be reduced.

What am I afraid of?

What do I want?

Who am I trying to impress?

What am I avoiding?

Am I helping?

Did I hurt someone?

Do I owe an apology?

Am I listening?

Am I trying to control something that isn't mine?

Simple questions.

Hard answers.

Maybe I should not ask all of them every morning.

That sounds exhausting.

Life also needs breakfast.

Humor.

Music.

Baseball.

Sex.

Walking.

Eating.

Sleeping.

Doing absolutely nothing useful.

Self-confrontation can become narcissism if I stare inward forever.

At some point:

Enough, Jose.

Go outside.

That's another blind spot worth admitting.

A book about examining myself could accidentally convince me that the self deserves constant examination.

It doesn't.

Sometimes the healthiest thing is forgetting myself.

Playing.

Helping.

Working.

Laughing.

Listening.

Being absorbed in something that doesn't require an internal narrator.

Maybe one purpose of self-awareness is eventually to need less self-awareness in the moment.

Practice until presence becomes possible.

Baseball again.

A hitter cannot stand in the box conducting a psychological audit.

Am I afraid?

Is my ego attached to the outcome?

Am I embracing uncertainty?

Strike three.

Sit down, philosopher.

At some point the work before the pitch has to become trust during the pitch.

See it.

Hit it.

Life has those moments too.

Prepare.

Reflect.

Then live.

This book belongs before the game.

Not during every pitch.

So maybe *How To Get Better* should eventually become unnecessary.

That would be a good outcome.

Not because I mastered its lessons.

Because some questions became habits.

Something happens and somewhere inside:

Careful.

Maybe you're missing something.

That's enough.

No chapter number required.

And if I forget?

I will.

Return.

That word may matter more than improvement.

Return.

To curiosity after certainty.

To empathy after anger.

To responsibility after excuse.

To courage after retreat.

To openness after cynicism.

To listening after interruption.

To humility after ego.

To love after fear.

Return.

There will be relapses.

I dislike that word here because it sounds clinical.

Let's call them Tuesdays.

Ordinary days when I know better and don't do better.

There will be many Tuesdays.

No surprise.

The measure cannot be whether Tuesday disappears.

Maybe the measure is what happens Wednesday.

Do I defend Tuesday?

Explain Tuesday?

Blame somebody for Tuesday?

Pretend Tuesday didn't happen?

Or:

That wasn't who I want to be.

What happened?

What needs repair?

What can I do differently?

Then Wednesday.

This is not absolution.

Repeated harmful behavior requires more than beautiful reflection.

If the same apology appears repeatedly without behavioral change, eventually the apology becomes part of the pattern.

That matters.

Self-forgiveness cannot become a revolving credit line for behavior I refuse to address.

So return must contain adjustment.

Otherwise I'm just walking in circles and calling it a journey.

Maybe this is where discipline reenters.

Not punishment.

Practice.

Choose one thing.

Not nineteen.

One.

Maybe today:

Let people finish speaking.

That's enough.

Observe it.

Fail.

Try again.

Maybe next month something else becomes obvious.

This book should not become another burden.

The objective is awareness that makes life more available, not a new system for feeling inadequate.

I want to be careful here because "getting better" can become its own tyranny.

Always optimizing.

Always measuring.

Always fixing.

Always becoming.

What if I am allowed to exist too?

That's important.

There is a difference between:

I can get better.

and

I am not acceptable until I do.

The first creates possibility.

The second creates a prison.

I don't want this book used as a weapon against myself.

Or anybody else.

Especially anybody else.

Imagine finishing nineteen confessions about self-confrontation and thinking:

My brother really needs to read Chapter Eleven.

Maybe.

Read it again yourself first.

That may be the rule.

If I feel an urgent need to recommend one of these confessions to somebody else, I should probably reread it before sending it.

Not because they're necessarily innocent.

Because my enthusiasm for their self-confrontation should trigger curiosity about mine.

The title is *How To Get Better.*

Not:

How To Get Them Better.

Important distinction.

If someone else reads this book, I hope they understand that.

I am not standing on the sidewalk pointing toward a destination.

I'm walking.

Sometimes in the wrong direction.

These pages are notes I wrote while trying to notice.

You are welcome to walk beside me for a while.

But don't follow me blindly.

I don't know where I'm going either.

Maybe something I wrote is wrong.

Almost certainly.

Maybe something is incomplete.

Certainly.

Maybe some confession reflects my generation, my experiences, my temperament, my fears more than something universal.

Of course.

That is why the word **my** matters.

My confession.

Not yours.

Take what creates useful friction.

Leave what doesn't.

Challenge what seems wrong.

If something makes you defensive, don't automatically assume that means it's true.

That's another cheap psychological trick.

Sometimes you're defensive because the accusation is inaccurate.

Investigate.

Don't surrender your judgment to this book either.

If these pages accomplish anything, I hope they create a pause.

That's all.

A pause between certainty and action.

Between fear and retreat.

Between anger and punishment.

Between love and control.

Between criticism and contempt.

Between error and excuse.

Inside that pause, maybe a question:

What am I not seeing?

Not:

What am I definitely wrong about?

That would be another certainty.

What am I not seeing?

Maybe nothing relevant.

Maybe everything.

Look.

Then decide.

Self-confrontation cannot eliminate decision.

Eventually life demands movement.

So after the question:

Choose.

Act.

Accept consequences.

Learn.

Adjust.

Return.

That is the entire process.

No trademark required.

I am sixty years old as I prepare this book for September 2026.

I have lived long enough to accumulate evidence against myself.

That is one of aging's gifts if I allow it.

Patterns become harder to call accidents.

But aging provides another kind of evidence.

Time is not theoretical anymore.

Never was.

I just experienced it that way when I was younger.

There are fewer seasons ahead than behind.

That's not morbid.

Arithmetic.

And arithmetic can clarify.

How much time do I want to spend winning arguments nobody remembers?

How much time worrying about outcomes I cannot control?

How much time resenting people who aren't thinking about me?

How much time postponing affection?

How much time protecting an image of myself that dies when I do?

Those questions feel different now.

Good.

Maybe mortality edits.

It cuts unnecessary paragraphs.

Maybe unnecessary grudges too.

Not all.

Some boundaries deserve permanence.

Again, nuance.

But perhaps age helps distinguish what requires protection from what merely requires letting go.

I hope.

Ask me later.

There are still things I want.

Experiences.

Time with family.

Baseball.

Writing.

Financial security.

Curiosity.

Travel.

Good meals.

Quiet.

I don't need to pretend detachment from desire.

Desire is part of being alive.

The question is whether wanting something makes everything around it invisible.

Can I pursue without becoming possessed by pursuit?

Care deeply.

Hold lightly.

Chapter Nineteen.

And eventually I will lose.

Everything.

We all do.

Possessions.

Roles.

Strength.

People.

Then ourselves.

That sounds bleak only if permanence was the requirement for value.

I don't think it is anymore.

A baseball game ends.

Still worth playing.

A meal ends.

Still worth eating.

A conversation ends.

Still worth having.

A life ends.

I cannot logically conclude from that that it wasn't worth living.

Temporary is not synonymous with meaningless.

Maybe that is the freedom of insignificance one last time.

Nothing I do has to become eternal to matter locally.

I don't need millions of readers.

I don't need thousands.

I don't need hundreds.

This book already has one reader it was written for.

Me.

If it helps me catch myself one conversation earlier, it did something.

If my daughter someday reads a page and understands her father slightly differently, something.

If one coach becomes five percent more curious about the kid in front of him, something.

No empire required.

That feels appropriate for an autodidact writing confessions.

No credential.

No pulpit.

No final theory.

Just evidence collected from one life.

So now what, Jose?

Close the book.

Really.

You've said enough.

Go downstairs.

Call somebody.

Coach if there's a game.

Listen if someone is talking.

Eat if you're hungry.

Rest if you're tired.

Apologize if you owe one.

Say no if no is necessary.

Say yes when fear is the only reason you're saying no.

Maybe.

Careful with universal rules.

You almost made it to the end.

And when you inevitably catch yourself violating something you wrote here, laugh if the damage isn't serious.

Then correct.

Do not become the fundamentalist of your own book.

That would be a spectacular ending.

You do not owe these nineteen confessions perfection.

You owe them honesty.

Maybe not even them.

Yourself.

And the people affected by your behavior.

The next time someone tells you something about yourself that hurts, notice the lawyer.

The next time fear arrives, ask what boundary it is showing you.

The next time you feel insignificant, remember the freedom.

The next time the world disappoints you, resist the cheap intelligence of cynicism.

The next time you want to control someone you love, loosen your hand.

The next time you become certain, look for the cracked mirror.

The next time you fail:

Next pitch.

And every once in a while—

not obsessively,

not ceremonially,

not because a book told you to—

ask:

What am I not seeing?

Then leave enough silence for the question to become uncomfortable.

That's probably where the work starts again.